



Can't Let My Heart Fall

THE HEARTS OF TUDOR ENGLAND SERIES

REBECCA PAULINYI

Can't Let My Heart Fall

Rebecca Paulinyi

Copyright © 2021 Rebecca Paulinyi

All rights reserved

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by: GM Book Covers

For my husband - thank you for your endless support, cups of tea and for being an amazing father, especially when I disappear to write.

Contents

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Chapter Fifty-Three
Chapter Fifty-Four
Chapter Fifty-Five
Chapter Fifty-Six
Chapter Fifty-Seven
Chapter Fifty-Eight
Chapter Fifty-Nine
Chapter Sixty
Chapter Sixty-One
Chapter Sixty-Two
Chapter Sixty-Three
Chapter Sixty-Four
Chapter Sixty-Five
Chapter Sixty-Six
Chapter Sixty-Seven
Chapter Sixty-Eight
Chapter Sixty-Nine
Chapter Seventy
Chapter Seventy-One
Chapter Seventy-Two
Chapter Seventy-Three
Chapter Seventy-Four
Chapter Seventy-Five
Chapter Seventy-Six
Chapter Seventy-Seven
Chapter Seventy-Eight
Chapter Seventy-Nine

[Afterword](#)

[Want more?](#)

[Misrule My Heart](#)

[Books In This Series](#)

[Books By This Author](#)

To hear about new releases, see pictures of my dog and generally hear about my writing, you can sign up to my newsletter here: tiny.cc/paulinyi

Chapter One

Alice

Queen Katherine's hands danced delicately over the fine shirt she was sewing for her husband, King Henry, as one of the other maids-in-waiting played the lute in the corner of the room. I sat in the window seat, my eyes occasionally drifting out to the courtyard below, where a group of young men were practising their jousting.

The sewing in my own hands lay forgotten in my lap while I watched the group part and bow as King Henry rode out on a magnificent horse, wearing thick furs and an easy smile.

I sat up a little straighter, although of course he could not see me. He was no stranger to the Queen's rooms, and so I had met him - but the frequency of his visits had decreased in the two years since I had come to serve Queen Katherine, and with rumours that he was now courting Anne Boleyn, a former maid of honour like me, those visits diminished even further.

It was too chilly to have the windows open, and so I watched as he shouted something jovial to the young men, before riding off at a pace beyond the castle walls.

My eyes flicked to Katherine, her focus solely on the shirt she was sewing for her husband, and my heart ached a little. Yes, she was the Queen of England. Yes, she had unimaginable wealth and power.

But it seemed she had lost the love of the man she so clearly adored - and the pain of that was clear in her eyes every single day.

As innocent of matters of the heart as I was, I could see the pain love caused her. And that was why, the day before my eighteenth birthday, I had vowed to never fall in love.

I would marry, of course, if God was good enough to provide a husband. I hoped I would raise children and have daughters and sons I could in turn help to marry well.

But I had seen the heartbreak that my mother's death had

inflicted on my father, and seen the pain that my mistress went through every day as she saw her husband fall in love with another woman.

And so I vowed, once more, as I picked up my sewing and shoved the needle a little too roughly through the thin fabric, that no man would ever win my heart.

It was a pain I would happily live without.

"Alice?" My attention was caught by the sound of my name, and I blushed when I realised Lady Lockwood had been waiting for me to respond.

"Sorry, my lady," I said, ducking my head. I prided myself on excellent service, and it was not like me to let my attention wander.

"Would you read, before mass? Her Grace likes to hear your voice."

I nodded, and made my way to a chair nearer the queen, where a book of poems sat from the previous day. After Mother's death, Father had hired the best governess he could find - and, luckily, had been keen for me to learn reading, writing and even some arithmetic, alongside the traditional wifely arts.

I bowed in a deep curtsy to her, and settled myself in the chair, finding where I had left off before beginning to recite in the clearest voice I could.

I knew some of the other maids of honour - and even the ladies in waiting - could not read as well as I, and my clear voice had caused the Queen to pick me out many times over. She had asked me to write letters for her, too, when there had been none of her closest ladies available, and I felt privileged to have put this great woman's words to paper, to have written to her daughter, the Princess Mary - even if I occasionally caught jealous looks from some of my fellow maids.

I had been reading for almost half an hour when a squire entered, and every head turned in his direction. It used to be common for the Queen to receive missives from the King, but they were rarer these days. Sometimes ladies would receive a summons from their husband, or their father, or a note from a prospective husband.

Today, the squire approached, bowed to the queen, and to my surprise passed a note to me before departing, without turning his

back on Katherine.

I read the note quickly, before turning to Katherine who was waiting - along with many of the other women around us - to hear what it said.

"My father has asked that I might attend him, at your earliest convenience, Your Highness."

She smiled at me in a way that made my heart feel more whole than it had done in a long while. It was a mother's smile, and it seemed a travesty that her own daughter were housed so far away and could not bask in its warmth.

"You may go, Alice," she said, a Spanish hint to her voice even after so many years in this country.

"Thank you, your Grace," I said, curtsying before departing, wondering why Father wished to see me. Although we both lived at Court, we rarely saw one another, and even more rarely did he seek me out. He was far too busy to be seeing me regularly, and I too busy to be offended.

But if he wanted to see me now, it must be something of import. And the only thing I could think of was the most important event in any young lady's life - the finding of a husband.

As the note had said, he was in his office, where he worked on treaties and letters as part of the Royal Council. I knew his vast knowledge of languages afforded him a privileged place within the King's advisers - after all, that was the reason I had a coveted place in the Queen's household.

"My lord Father," I said, after he had called me in, with a dip of my head to show my respect. He stood and placed his hand on my shoulder for a moment, before sitting back in his chair and gesturing for me to take a seat.

"Alice," he said, a smile on his lips that I had not seen there often. "I hope the Queen was not displeased by my summons."

I shook my head. "She is always very accommodating when our families need us," I said. "And I believe she is pleased with my service."

"That is wonderful to hear. Does she still like to hear you read?"

I nodded; "In English, Latin and French. And I undertake writing for her too, on occasion."

"Excellent. You are a credit to the family."

I blushed, and belatedly thanked him. Compliments were not handed out lightly by Viscount Bellemonde, and I could not remember the last time I had heard one pass his lips - about anyone, let alone me.

"Which brings me to my reason for summoning you here today. I have found you a husband."

Even though I had suspected this might be the reason for his note, I still felt a bubbling in my stomach - a strange mix of nerves and excitement.

The next phase of my life, it seemed, was about to begin.

"Thank you, Father," I answered.

"He is from a good family, and your marriage will forge a powerful allegiance between two of the foremost families of this country."

He spoke with pride, and I felt it in my chest too; I knew how much the family's reputation meant to him. Having one daughter, and no sons, had surely dented his chances of creating a dynasty - but now, if I made an advantageous marriage, perhaps all was not quite lost.

"I am honoured," I said, although I ached to know a little more of this man who was to be my husband. "May I know his name?"

"Christopher Danley," he said. "His father is the Earl of Kent."

The son of an Earl... it was a good match. "Is he the eldest son?"

Father smiled, his lips curling wide enough that I could see his teeth.

"Of course."

"If I may make one request," I said, cautiously choosing my words. "I should like to see him before I marry him."

"What difference will that make?" Father asked, with no

sympathies for a woman's lack of agency in her life.

"None, I suppose," I said. "Of course I would marry whomever you asked me to. But... I should like to have an idea of who he is before I say my vows."

Father watched me for a moment, and I hoped my words had convinced him. I had always known I would marry whoever was chosen for me - and that the choosing would be even more important because I was an only child, and the child of a Viscount.

I was no rebel; I would not run from a match my father made, nor refuse to say the vows. But before I would belong to this man, I just wanted to lay eyes on him. To know what my future held.

"Strange notions you women have," he said, shaking his head. "Very well. I'm sure I can arrange for him to visit with the Queen and her ladies, and you can set eyes on him then. I do not know if he is yet aware of your name, so say nothing."

I nodded. "Thank you, Father."

"You should be returning to her Grace."

I nodded, and stood, bobbing a curtsy as I left. "Good day, Father."

I took my time wandering back along the corridor, letting his news sink in. I was to be a wife. That was the only detail I really knew; that and the heritage of this man who was to be my husband.

Christopher.

Would he be of an age with me? Or much older? Many women married older men, or widowers - but Father had not mentioned a previous wife, or children for that matter.

I paused at a small, square window to watch the busy goings-on below. I would be a wife, and hopefully a mother. That was always the plan, and now it was being put into motion. I knew I would not allow myself to fall in love with any man - but I did hope he was not too old, and not a cruel man. As long as he was kind, I thought I could get along with anyone.

I just had to wait and see who it was I would be starting the rest of my life with.

Chapter Two

Christopher

"You must marry."

I put my boots upon the desk, ignoring my father's deeply ingrained scowl. "I certainly have no plans to."

"You have wasted your life at sea-"

"I have discovered places never visited by mankind before, Father!" I said, raising my voice, my frustration showing clearly. How could he not understand that there was more to life than marrying and producing an heir to carry on the family name? There was a whole world out there - a world I had thoroughly enjoyed exploring, so far.

A world I was not finished with yet.

"You have but one brother, who is still in the schoolroom."

A half-brother, but I did not point that out. Father seemed far too old to have a child who was but fifteen, but his second marriage had been fruitful just the once, fifteen years after my own birth.

Fifteen years after the death of my mother.

"Francis is desperate to inherit," I drawled.

"Well he may well do, at the rate you're going. You are thirty years old, Christopher. You will marry, and you will have an heir - and ideally a spare, goddamit - or you will have no more adventures."

My boots slipped off the table as I sat up in shock.

"What are you saying?"

"I have found you a bride. She is of a good family, she has a good relationship with Her Majesty the Queen, and she is biddable, or so I'm told. You will marry her - or I shall disinherit you."

"You can't do that."

He laughed, a cruel sound that I had rarely heard. "I most certainly can. I shall make Francis my heir - and bestow all funds and estates on him. There shall be no money for sea-faring, Christopher - not unless you are married, with a child."

My foot tapped on the floor, frustration building within me. "So it is perfectly acceptable if I marry this girl - or is she an old spinster? No, don't answer, of course she's a girl, you want her fertile. So I can marry her, and get her pregnant, and sail off on the next ship, and you have no concerns with that?"

Father drummed his fingers on the desk. "Many husbands and wives live apart."

I snorted; Father and his second wife, Agnes, were one such couple.

"Do your duty, Christopher, or you can find out what it means in this world to have nothing."

I stood and left the room without another word.

My Father's London home was grand, but I had not chosen to stay there upon my return from Italy the previous week. No, instead I had taken a room at an inn, hoping to avoid my Father for a few days.

News, it seemed, travelled fast, and before long he had summoned me for the delightful conversation I had just left.

As I exited the manor house, slamming the door behind me, I thought about his words. Yes, it was true that his money - my inheritance - funded my trips. But I was paid well for my discoveries, and had a little set aside...

But not enough. He knew that, and I certainly did. Travelling the world was an expensive business, and I was privileged to be able to afford a galleon of my own and a crew to run her.

Apparently, I would be losing that privilege if I did not marry.

I had never imagined myself with a wife. I saw a life of travel, of women certainly - but not one wife, not the brood of children my father wanted me saddled with. I liked my life as it was - and, if I could carry on traversing as I pleased, I would not be too upset to let Francis take the title when Father passed on.

But Francis and I were not close, thanks to the large age difference and markedly different upbringings - and so I knew even if Father did not threaten my income, Francis probably would.

As I sat myself on a stool at the bar and ordered a drink, I let out a heavy sigh.

"It's not all that bad," a young woman said, bringing me a tankard of ale without me needing to ask. Her dark hair fell to her waist, and her dress was cut a little lower than would have been deemed appropriate in Court society.

But this pub was not polite society, and as she sashayed past me I noticed the swing of her hips and the curve of her body beneath her dress.

"I think it might be," I said with a sigh, gulping down the ale and wishing for the strong alcohol I'd enjoyed on my travels. Drinking that could certainly help you forget your worries for a day or two...

"Well, I've always got a friendly ear," she said, walking back with two empty tankards. "If you want to share."

It had been a while since I had lain with a woman, and this young lady was certainly tempting for the night. I knew I attracted women - that much had been obvious in the years since I had been old enough to enjoy their attentions. And I was certainly attracted to this woman - although perhaps she was happily married, or waiting for the perfect husband to sweep her off her feet.

"My father wishes me to marry," I told her, sharing my news for no real reason other than to keep her here, talking to me.

"You look of an age to be married, my lord," she said with a smile.

"I suppose I am. But I don't wish to be married."

"Then don't. You're a man - you have the freedom to say no, don't you?"

I sighed; I supposed I did - but I would be condemning myself to a life of poverty. I was about to voice that, when I realised how ridiculously entitled that would make me sound. I would still have more money than this beautiful woman before me - I certainly could not complain about it to her.

"I suppose so," I said, suppressing another sigh.

"And marriage is not so terrible," she said with a wide grin. "I can tell you that for nothing."

I pushed the tankard towards her and she refilled it without question. If marriage made her so happy, I supposed the chances of her ending up in my bed that night were rather slim - although, if I were honest, the thought of being married to a stranger had dampened any desire I might feel, anyway.

"I shall have to take your word for it."



Father had suggested I visit the Queen to pay my respects, and although the rumours circling the court like ravens were that this Queen's star was waning, I thought it could not do any harm. I did not truly believe King Henry could possibly divorce her - but Anne Boleyn was, it seemed, far more in the King's favour at this moment.

It was an hour where several gentlemen were calling to pay their respects to the Queen and her ladies, and I recognised one such man from my days at St Paul's.

"Lord Whistlewaite," I said, shaking his hand with a grin. "You are looking well."

"And you, Lord Danley," he said. "I thought you were off, sailing the seven seas?"

I grinned more broadly, running a hand through my now-cropped hair. For so many months at sea it had grown long and unruly, but for now my dark mop was tamed. "Alas, duty calls here in England."

"Indeed it does," he said with a sigh.

I was about to ask him about the rumour I had heard that he was married, when we were ushered into the large chamber the Queen used for receiving guests. She sat under the canopy of state, two ladies on either side, and one younger lady sat reading from a book of poetry at a nearside table. At our arrival she stopped reading, and I found I had to tear my glance away from her to ensure I gave the Queen my full respect.

I sank into a low bow. "I am honored to be here, Your Majesty."

When I had risen, her eyes focussed on me with the precision of an arrow. "Lord Danley, are you not? The Earl of Kent's son?"

"Indeed, Your Grace."

"I hear you are a traveller."

"I like to travel," I agreed, with a nod of my head.

"Have you ever been to Spain?"

I nodded once more. "Several times. The climate there is second to none - and the oranges..."

A smile broke out on her face, and all of a sudden she seemed ten years younger. She was beautiful, and in that moment seemed happy - and I was shocked to see the difference it made to her countenance. "Oh! I can agree with you there. All these years in England, which I do love so much - yet still I cannot help but miss the sunshine!"

"I cannot disagree with you. I have always thought the sun in Spain to be perfect - neither too hot, nor too cold."

"We shall be pleased to see you here again for a visit, Lord Danley."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," I said, walking backwards away from her until she addressed the next young man.

I felt eyes upon me, and when I glanced behind me, I noticed the young lady with the book had directed her gaze at me; and she had not lowered her eyes upon my observing her.

"Good day," I said with a bow. "I am Christopher Danley."

She stood and curtsied, her eyes immediately back on mine when she rose. "Alice Page, my lord," she said, and her eyes were the most intriguing mix of green and blue I had ever seen.

"May I ask what you are reading?"

"Poetry," she said. "A translation of Euripides."

I held back a smirk; "It is a shame the translation is so poor."

"It is not!" she exclaimed, then blushed when she realised her voice had risen louder than the others.

"Oh, I'm afraid it is," I said, a smile playing deliciously on my lips. "I read the original Greek, and the English translation is nothing in comparison."

"The words are beautiful," she insisted. "It is one of the Queen's favourites."

"Then I should love to read the original Greek for you all sometime."

Chapter Three

Alice

His eyes seemed to twinkle with mirth, even as I could feel anger growing hotly inside of me. The poems were beautiful; I felt the words in my very soul. How dare he call it a poor translation?

"Well, I am sure we would all be mesmerised, my lord." Surely, surely this could not be the Christopher I was supposed to marry? And yet the name was right, I knew it in my heart - no matter how much I tried to deny it. I could feel the sarcasm biting my words as they left my mouth, and despite knowing I should be more polite, his words made my blood boil in anger.

And then he laughed.

In the face of my rage, he laughed, and I was stunned.

"Mistress Alice is being very entertaining today, it seems," said one of the other maids of honour, Jane. She had never much liked me, nor I her - and so I was not surprised she was drawing attention to me with her cutting comment.

Eyes were upon us, and Christopher gave an easy smile. "The lady and I were just disagreeing over the best version of this set of poems. While I prefer the original Greek, she is enamoured with the English translation."

Most of the interest died down at our uninteresting topic of conversation, but Jane sashayed over with a smile on her face. "Did you learn Greek at school, my lord?"

"A little," he said. "Although the masters generally favoured Latin. But this particular book I read in Greece, when I last visited."

"You have been more than once," she said, shock colouring her tone, and I grudgingly admitted to myself that actually visiting Greece was impressive.

"Indeed," he said, with a bow of his head. "I like to travel."

"How wonderful," Jane said with a simpering smile. "You must tell us all about your travels!" She reached out to touch his arm for a moment, and I could not help but smile inwardly as he moved away.

"I should be honoured," he said. "Another time, however; I'm afraid my father is expecting me." He swept us a bow.

"Ladies." Then another for her majesty, before he backed out of the room, his green eyes twinkling with that same mirth as he did so.

"Read to us, Alice, if you please," Queen Katherine said once the young men were gone, and although I turned back to the words as asked, I had to admit my fervour for them had dampened a little.

How I wished I could read the original Greek. But as educated as I was, no-one taught Greek to ladies. Perhaps I could find a way of learning on my own...

That night, in my narrow bed in the dorter I shared with all the other young maids, I found sleep hard to drift into. My frustrations from earlier in the day played on my mind, as did Christopher's smug, handsome face.

Oh, there was no denying he was handsome. Christopher Danley, the man I was to marry, was younger and more handsome than the husbands of most of the recently-married women I was acquainted with. And I knew that for that, I should be grateful indeed.

But there was something about the arrogance in his voice that made me bristle against the idea. I would not refuse him, of course; my father had made it clear I was to marry him, no matter the outcome of our little meeting. That arrogance, though, as he stated my beloved translation was poor, as he showed off about his travels to Greece and who knew where else... that was what lingered in my mind.

The bed creaked as I turned over, more restless than I had been in a long time. Soft snores filled the room, and how I wished I could join the land of the sleeping and not be obsessing over the man who was to be my husband.

As I imagined his laughter, and how easily he had dismissed my thoughts about the book - because, of course, as a woman I could not read the original Greek - I consoled myself with the fact that it would be very easy to keep my promise to myself and not fall in love with my husband.

Chapter Four

Christopher

I grinned as I found the volume of poems on the shelf in my Father's library. I had waited until he had gone out riding, hoping to avoid another confrontation about the upcoming marriage he was forcing me into.

I did not even know the name of the girl he planned for me to marry, let alone her age or what she might look like. It felt like a dream that was warping into a nightmare, and I could not really believe it was happening.

I was not ready to marry.

Still, I had been keen to find this book, even if it were just to show the fiery woman who attended the Queen that my words had not all been bluster. The words sounded beautiful in their native language - far more so than in English, in my opinion - but I also wondered if I could translate them myself, to the Queen and her ladies. Let them hear how wonderful the words could truly be, when they weren't butchered by whomever had done the translation that the girl - Alice, I remembered her name was - had held in her delicate hands, as she got progressively more angry with me.

I opened the heavy tome and smiled at the memory. Why had her frustration with my words stuck in my mind? I supposed it was unusual for anyone to disagree so vehemently with me. Well, any woman, that was for sure. Members of my family were a different matter.

Chapter Five

Alice

I found my head drooping forwards a little as we knelt in the chapel to pray, and internally chastised myself. It would not do to lose sleep over this upcoming wedding. It was a business arrangement, nothing more. I would marry him, he would take my dowry, we would do whatever it was married couples did (of which I had heard but whispers - whispers enough to make me blush), and I would return to Court, hopefully as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Katherine. After all, she seemed fond of me, and once I was a married lady I could join the higher rung of her attendants, if she so wished.

There would be no need for my husband and I to see much of each other. And if I were to fall pregnant - which was, of course, the desired outcome of such a union - I would enter confinement, have the babe and then re-enter my Queen's service.

It would be simple. There need be no messy emotions involved, I told myself, as we repaired to the Queen's rooms for a light meal that I hoped would give me the energy to fight this exhaustion. In the afternoon there was to be a joust, in preparation for the Easter celebrations, and so I knew there would be no chance to sneak away and rest my eyes. No, I must soldier on until bedtime, and hope my sleep was not as plagued with thoughts of marriage as it had been the previous night.



Excitement flitted through the Court as crowds flocked to the much-anticipated joust. Spring felt like it was finally here, as the flowers bloomed gloriously and the air - no longer icy - breezed by us. It had been a long and dark winter, but the hope of spring and summer made us all feel buoyant - even with my impending nuptials hanging over my head.

I wondered when I should announce my marriage to the Queen, and ask her permission to leave her service to become a wife. My father would know; certainly not yet, when it seemed the gentleman

in question wasn't even aware of the plan for us to marry.

Perhaps he would refuse?

He had shown no flash of recognition at my name, said no words to me that suggested he knew who I was outside of one of the ladies serving Queen Katherine. Had his father arranged this match, as mine had? Did he have any say in the matter?

He was a man; of course he did. I realised as I sat in the stands, behind the Queen, that this marriage I had thought of as inevitable may very well not go ahead. Perhaps Christopher would not wish to marry, or would not like the look of me, or my biting words.

As disappointment settled in the pit of my stomach, I tried to take a moment to understand my own emotions. Christopher had simply made me feel angry, so any disappointment could not be about the man I had thought I would marry, but the actual notion of marriage.

It was, of course, the next step in my life. The only next step - and I had to admit that the idea of having a household of my own held great appeal. As well as children...

But I had been perfectly happy before my father raised the idea of a marriage, and I told myself I would be perfectly happy if Christopher Danley decided not to marry me, for whatever reason.

I turned my attention to the ground below us, where the King was parading on a magnificent horse. He trotted over to where we sat, and I saw my Queen grin broadly as he offered his lance for her to set her token on. I found myself smiling too, pleased he had not snubbed her, but could not help wondering what the famed Mistress Boleyn thought of it. She had been a lady-in-waiting to Her Majesty not so long ago - but now she had her own apartments, her own ladies to wait upon her.

How quickly things could change.

The King rode back into the centre of the arena to rapturous applause. I joined in, feeling the excitement of the crowd beginning to build inside me, too. Just as I thought I might be able to forget about marriage for a few hours, his challengers were announced. Two names I did not recognise, and then-

"Lord Christopher Danley!"

For a moment my heart sank, and then some other feeling entirely rose up inside me as he entered the arena. His horse was jet black, and he sat astride it as though he had been born to ride. He held his helmet in one hand, his lance in another, and as he passed the King they seemed to share a friendly word.

And I imagined him coming to me for my token, and immediately banished the idea. We were not officially betrothed, let alone married - and I did not like him.

He just did look so well upon his horse.

"Oh look!" exclaimed Katherine with a clap of her hands. "It's that charming young man from yesterday. What fun today shall be!"

Chapter Six

Christopher

I had only been introduced to the King that morning, and had been warned by an old school friend that his moods could be sour. But today he had seemed cheery and magnanimous, and when he had invited me to joust I could not say no. I found I did not wish to; jousting was great fun, and an invite from the King himself was not to be sniffed at.

I had pondered my actions all day; I obviously must not hurt the King, but did I have to let him win? My pride was not keen on the idea, even though my head told me it was definitely the most sensible option. This was not a King who liked to lose, nor one who liked to forgive - and so I supposed my pride must fade into the background.

As Henry put on his helmet to further applause, I allowed my eyes to survey the crowds, a smile on my lips. The Queen was watching intently, her face full of joy, surrounded by a bevy of ladies. And behind her, I spotted that very woman who had remained on my mind since our meeting the day before.

Would it enrage her if I asked for her token for the joust?

I thought it might - and that made me even more determined.

I approached and bowed to the Queen as well as I could in my armour.

"Good luck today, Lord Danley," Queen Katherine called down. "Although I am sure you understand that I am supporting your challenger!"

I bowed my head. "I would expect nothing else, your Grace, and thank you for your luck. I wondered if I might instead ask Mistress Alice for her token? I did so enjoy our discussion of translations yesterday."

Titters spread through the crowd around her, as all the ladies' eyes turned to Alice. She flushed red, fury in her eyes, and I was sure

mine reflected the humour I felt.

Without a word she stood and removed her glove, placing it on my outstretched lance.

"God speed, my lord," she said, no smile on her lips, and I gave an over-effusive bow.

"My thanks, good lady. I shall wear it close to my heart in the hope it brings me luck!"

Before I could see her response, I removed the glove and tucked it beneath my breast-plate, before rounding on the King, who seemed excited and ready to joust.

For reasons I did not quite understand, having Alice's glove made me even less keen on the idea of losing.

Chapter Seven

Alice

The cheering in the tiltyard was deafening, and it took a while before I felt my heart rate return to normal after Christopher's show of asking for my favour. Did he know our fathers planned for us to wed? I did not think so, but he had sought me out, nonetheless.

A white handkerchief was dropped, and the first two competitors - neither of whom I recognised - bent low over their horses and charged towards one another, lances outstretched. Of course the aim was not to kill or seriously wound, but that did not stop it happening; I remembered one particularly bloody joust when I had only recently joined the household where a man had lost an eye. The amount of blood had made many ladies faint, and I had thrown up when they carried him past us.

I always felt a slight nervousness watching the jousting, even with the excitement in the air. There was a skill to it that was fascinating to watch, and I supposed the danger kept you on the edge of your seat. It made me feel a little queasy.

One knight fell, his armour clattering to the ground with a crash, but he was helped to his feet almost immediately, and a loud cheer went up, both for his safety and for the victor.

And then Christopher Danley entered the fray. I recognised him at once, despite the helmet he wore, and I found I could not tear my gaze away. He was to face the previous winner, who grinned before jamming his helmet back on. They were fairly evenly matched in height and size, with Christopher's horse just a little taller than the competitor's.

I held my breath as they shot towards one another, speed and agility and strength hurtling through the yard. I almost wanted to cover my eyes, but knew I would look a fool, and so I forced myself to watch as they clattered together. Neither fell, neither was injured, and so they retreated and began again.

There was a beauty in the way he held himself atop the horse, as

though he had every faith he would remain seated no matter what. He looked every bit a true knight, and the knowledge that he carried my token against his heart made mine flutter against my wishes.

Once again the terrible clash - and the competitor fell to the ground with a loud groan. The crowd held their breath, but I could not help but feel relief that it was not Christopher on the floor.

The man limped off - it was a positive sign that he was walking, really, and a loud cheer went up for Christopher. I joined the applause, unable to help myself, and as he pulled off his helmet for a moment and met my eyes, I saw him smile.

Lost in the moment, I did not realise that the cheers had become roars, for behind Christopher, King Henry had entered the tiltyard. Astride a magnificent horse, he looked every inch a King, and he paused to have a jovial word with Christopher before they both donned their helmets.

He would surely lose now, even if it were just to appease his King - wouldn't he? I knew of men who had angered the King for less, and I would much prefer to be tied to a man in the King's good favour. To be out of favour at this Court was a dangerous place indeed.

The crowd chanted for Henry, and I could tell Christopher was laughing beneath his helmet. At the drop of the handkerchief, they thundered towards each other, the hardest collision of them all - and both came out unharmed. Henry held his armoured fist to his chest, sweeping a knightly bow to his wife, before turning to face Christopher again. I found myself holding my breath, unable to join the chants for the King, unable to stop watching Christopher. His armour had become dusty now, the ground beneath them churned up by the horses' hooves - and this was only a practice. When the big tournaments would be held, there would be so many more challengers - and I wondered if Christopher would be there among them. He was young, he was handsome, and he was talented; I rather thought he would be.

Again and again they charged, glancing blows off shoulders and breastplates until lances met in mid air with a sickening crack. I stood, needing to see more, and I was not the only one - and then Henry emerged the victor, Christopher retreating with a broken lance.

I felt my heartbeat slow; a broken lance was not a broken neck. His pride might well have been dented, but at least his head was not.

Besides, it was a great honour to lose to your King. The men touched gauntlets, lifted visors and laughed, and it was clear that Henry was as enamoured with Christopher as the ladies of the court seemed to be.

Good, I thought to myself. I am marrying for status, and this will only enhance it.

I did not like to think of how hard it was to watch him in the pathway of possible danger.

Chapter Eight

Christopher

"Christopher."

"You used to call me Kit. Remember?" I said, a sneer on my face that seemed to be ever-present when speaking to my father these days.

"You were a boy. You are a man now - a man who needs to take some damned responsibility."

I sighed; this argument had been had over and over again. I doubted we would ever agree - and yet the only way to settle it was to give up my freedom, give up my choices in life and do as my father insisted.

"I have secured you a bride. All you must do is turn up to the church on Friday and say your vows before the priest. Then you can do what is to be done, give the Danley name an heir and you can be off on your travels, if that is what you desire."

"Friday?" Panic rose in my chest. I had not expected it to be so soon.

"Friday," my father repeated, slapping his hand on the table to emphasise the point.

"May I ask who you are expecting me to marry?"

"She is the daughter of Viscount Bellemonde."

"Has she had any say in this match?" I asked, grasping at straws.

"I have no idea," my father said, as if such things were not important. "Her father and I have arranged everything. He is happy with the match, and I am sure she is too. She has a handsome dowry, so you needn't worry on that score."

I began to pace the room. "And what of her name? Or her age? Or her looks? Do you truly think it is not necessary for me to know any of these things before I marry a woman?"

Father pulled himself to his full height, making me feel for a moment like I was a little child once more. "You are thirty years old. If you wanted to choose a wife that you liked the name of, and the age of, and the looks of - you should have done it yourself. Now you will marry a girl of a good family, or you shall fund your adventures by yourself."

"Father..."

"No, Christopher. There is no discussion to be had. Friday, St James's chapel, 12 o'clock. I will be there to witness, as will her father."

I could see by the darkness in his eyes and the way his jaw was set that there was no point arguing any longer.

"Good day."

I left, my mind whirring. Could I just refuse to turn up? That would ensure I lost my inheritance, as well as making a fool of this poor girl who was being pushed into marriage with me.

Perhaps I could persuade her to cry off. If it wasn't me who called off the nuptials, then Father could not go through with his threat - could he?

Or must I marry a woman I did not know, for money? That thought did not sit well with me either.

I took a moment before I left the house to stand before the portrait of my mother. She had died at my birth, and so I had never known her - but sometimes I liked to imagine my life if things had been different. Imagine having a warmer upbringing, or someone else's opinion on the events that would change my whole life.

Events like my wedding in three days' time.

Chapter Nine

Alice

A note arrived that evening, brought by a page and handed to me. It was clearly my father's handwriting, and it was brief.

Wedding to be at noon on Friday, St James's chapel. Meet me at my office at 11. Ask the Queen's permission tonight.

He did not sign his name, and there was no need; there was only one person who could write this note.

I gulped.

This was really happening.

I waited until after dinner to approach the Queen, when quiet music was being played by one of the girls on a harp, and most of the women were partaking in sewing.

"Your Majesty," I said, dipping my head and waiting for her to respond.

"Alice," she said, a kind smile on her face.

"Might I trouble you for a few moments?" I asked.

"Of course, my dear. What can I help you with?"

I swallowed; this made me more nervous than I expected. Not only did saying the words out loud make it seem more real, I also worried that the Queen might be annoyed for the lack of notice she was being given that I was to leave her service as a maid of honour. In truth, I was shocked at the lack of warning. It was but three days away...

"My father has informed me that he has found me a husband," I said. "And wishes for me to be married three days hence - if Your Majesty is agreeable to the match."

"I shall miss your service, Alice," she said, folding her hands

together on her lap. "You read beautifully. But of course, I give you my blessing - I am glad your father has found you a suitable husband, and of course you must heed his wishes. Who is the young man?"

"Lord Danley," I murmured, but I could tell from a few gasps that my words had been heard beyond our private conversation.

Her eyes lit up and she clasped her hands together. "Oh! What a perfect match. Both young, and beautiful, and knowledgeable! Ah, you have made me a happy woman indeed, even knowing I shall lose you from my household."

For a moment I wondered if I dare mention a role in her household once I was married, but then decided I did not; I had asked for enough for one day.

"You may of course leave with your husband once you are married on Friday," she said, "Unless you need to leave earlier?"

"No, Your Grace," I said. "I am sorry to be giving you such little notice."

"Ah," she said, with a knowing look. "We women rarely get the luxury of planning the timings of these things. Never fear. And if, in time, you wish to return to a position at Court, please write to me."

I smiled in earnest at that, and gave a deep curtsy. "Thank you, Your Grace. You are most generous."

I felt every eye on me as I returned to my chair and my sewing. I presumed Lord Danley now knew about the match; knew he was to marry *me*.

What had he thought, I wondered, when he had found out? Had he wondered what he would do with an unruly, sarcastic wife?

I supposed I would need to hold my tongue around him from now on; I only hoped he would not enrage me so, once we were married.

Married.

It sounded so foreign, and I could not really picture what it would be like. Sharing a house, a bed, a life with someone I did not even know.

So caught up in my thoughts was I, I did not notice Jane sidling

towards me.

"So. You are to marry Lord Danley?"

"So it seems," I answered, focusing on moving my needle backwards and forwards through the fabric, and not on her spiteful face.

"How on Earth did you manage that? I heard he planned to never take a wife - and all of a sudden he's marrying *you*!"

Thankfully, I was saved from answering by the Queen. "Time to retire, I think, ladies."

We filed out silently, but while I washed and changed and prayed, her words stayed on my mind.

What if he did not want to marry at all?

What if he did not turn up at the church?

Chapter Ten

Christopher

Friday dawned cold and wet, and as I dressed I watched the rain run down the windowpane. I had made a decision: would go to the church, I would speak with my intended in private, and I would give her the option to break it off.

I would encourage her to break it off.

And if she did not?

Well, I supposed I would marry her. For her own good as much as mine; no matter how irresponsible my father found my life to be, I would not leave a woman at the altar.

I donned a thick cloak before stepping out into the damp streets and hurrying towards the church. I wanted to be early, to beg a word with her before either of our fathers pushed us into our vows.

I tried not to ponder the possibility that I might be exiting the church a married man.

Although there was still time before I was expected, I saw my father stood in the doorway. He smiled, a self-satisfied grin that made my blood boil, and turned to enter the chapel before I had even reached him. It was childish, but I felt a temptation to turn and disappear into the back streets of London - but I did not.

The wooden door felt heavy, and I found myself holding my breath as it opened. Would this woman be there? How could I be expected to marry a woman whose name I did not know? How much had the priest been paid to ignore the normal formalities of reading the banns?

At the front of the church stood a woman in a sky-blue cloak. I could not see her face, or even her hair, for she wore the hood up. Next to her was a man who I presumed was her father, Viscount Bellemonde. He looked at me as he heard the door close, his face stern.

Was he hoping I would take care of his daughter?

Then why would he marry her to someone she had never met?

"Christopher," Father said from the front of the church, where he stood next to the priest. "This is Viscount Bellemonde, and Father Nicholas."

I gave a short bow to the Viscount, before acknowledging the priest, then turning expectantly towards this woman. She had not shown her face, and I found my mind going wild with anticipation.

"I wondered if I might have a word with my betrothed before the vows are spoken," I said, hoping the presence of the Priest would make Father more likely to acquiesce. "Just for a moment."

"I am not sure that's a good idea," Father said, and I tried to not let my anger rise.

"I'm sure we can find a moment, before we are bound together for eternity," I said, through gritted teeth.

"We can take a moment," the woman said, her voice soft and familiar.

And then she turned her face towards me, and my mouth dropped open.

Alice Page.

Chapter Eleven

Alice

Shock coloured his face, and I realised in that moment he had not known who he was to marry. What had he been told, I wondered? My first name? My father's rank?

I wondered if he wanted a minute so he could cry off, and I steeled myself as we walked out of earshot of our fathers. Both looked nervous; mine, at least, knew I would go through with the wedding he wanted to happen.

"Lady Alice," he said, and my heart sped up at his deep, urgent voice. It wasn't the anger I had felt before when I was around him...

I did not know what it was.

"Do you want to marry me?" he asked, and for a second the air froze in my lungs and my lips went dry.

He was giving me a choice?

"My father wishes me to marry you," I said. "I know nothing of you, but I will do as my father wishes."

"You are not... *opposed* to marrying me then?"

I blushed, and gave the only answer I could. "No, my lord."

For a moment there was silence between us, and I could practically hear the thoughts whirring around inside his head - except I had no idea what was making him think so hard.

Abruptly, he took my gloved hand and led me back to the priest. "Very well."

My heart stuttered back to life. *Very well*. The words that would seal my fate.

The priest glanced at us both, and I could feel every eye upon me, even though I did not turn to face them. I lowered my hood, and took

a steadying breath.

This was truly happening.

"Have you come freely here today to be married?" Father Nicholas asked, and I nodded, before realising words were probably clearer.

"I have."

"And Lord Danley, have you come here freely to be married to this woman?"

His voice was deep and sure and made me feel something new in the pit of my stomach. "I have."

When we had both agreed that we knew of no impediments to the match, Father Nicholas seemed satisfied, and asked us to repeat our vows. Christopher reached to take my hands in his, and I could feel their warmth even through my gloves.

"Christopher Danley," I repeated. "I take you as my husband, to honour, cherish and obey, for the rest of my life."

"Alice Page," he repeated, without hesitation. "I take you as my wife, to honour, cherish and protect, for the rest of my life."

The words made me want to smile, to scream, to run away; such a maelstrom of feelings was whipped up inside me, as my body began to realise that I was very, very nearly a married woman.

"Do you have the ring?" Father Nicholas asked Christopher, whose eyes suddenly widened. Had he forgotten? He looked to his father, who passed him a ring wordlessly, and then the ring was slipped onto my finger.

"With this ring, I thee wed."

In a daze, I moved forward as I was asked, to kneel before the altar as the nuptial mass was held. I knew it was wrong, but I could not focus on the ritual, or even on God; no, all my thoughts were of the man kneeling next to me. The man who was now my husband.

When I left this church, I would be Lady Danley, the future Countess of Kent.

I would belong to this infuriating, beautiful man beside me, and I did not know quite how to feel about that.



The Latin words went through my mind without leaving any impression, as I realised I was now a married man. I had come here to persuade the unlucky lady to refuse to go through with the marriage, but when I had seen who it was, something had stopped me.

I had given her a choice - but I had not made it clear to her that this marriage was one being forced upon me by my father.

Why?

I did not know what it was that had changed my mind. Since I had met Alice, and argued with her over translations, I had found my mind wandering back to her. She was pretty, that was for sure - but she also knew her own mind. And something about that had stuck with me, even when I had thought I would never see her again.

I had certainly never expected to see her waiting for me with a priest at her side.

It had been silent for a few moments before I realised that the mass was over, and the priest had blessed us with a smile on his lips. I stood, offering my arm to Alice, who took it after a moment's pause.

If I had to marry, there would certainly be many worse options, I supposed. There would not be love, but I hoped we could live a happy life together - and if not, she could be well provided for, and I could travel.

"Congratulations," the Duke was saying, reaching out to shake my hand and offering his daughter a smile. "I am sure you will be very happy together."

"Thank you," I said, feeling ambivalent towards a man who could marry his daughter to an unknown suitor.

"Indeed," Father said. "Congratulations." He reached to place a kiss to Alice's cheek, and looked as though he might shake my hand, but thought better of it.

We walked together to the door of the church, where it was still pouring with rain. I suddenly realised I had nowhere to take my new bride. My rented rooms would certainly not be appropriate, but I could not face going to live with my father again. I presumed she

would be leaving wherever the Queen's maids slept, but to go where?

As usual, it seemed my father had an answer to everything - even if I had not voiced this particular issue.

"Since you will need a permanent residence, now you are married, I have decided to gift you Chichester Place," he said, giving me a look that dared me to argue about my permanent residence in this country.

"My sincere thanks," I said, with very little sincerity. Chichester Place was an hour or so outside of London, and one of my father's many beautiful homes - but he knew it had never been one I had particularly favoured. Still, it was a spacious home, with a staff ready to serve it, and it was the solution to my concern of where to take my new wife.

Wife.

The word sounded foreign, even in my head.

"We should wait until the rain stops, to ride," I said, addressing Alice, who had pulled the hood of her cloak over her head once more.

"Of course, my lord," she said.

"You will need to collect your belongings from the palace?"

She nodded. "They are packed and waiting."

"Then perhaps you might do that, and I shall fetch mine, and we shall depart from the palace?"

"Very well."

It felt very stilted, but then I supposed I barely knew her. She was now my closest kin - but I did not know her middle name, or when she was born.

What a strange custom this was.

"Come along then, Alice," her father said. "We shall make haste so you are ready for Lord Danley."

Father waited until they were gone to utter a word.

"I am glad you did not do anything foolish," he said. "Treat her

well, and you shall have sons and daughters who will one day make your hair turn grey."

I sighed; of course, there was criticism. "Well that will be something to look forward to," I replied, my words laced with sarcasm.

"No travel before an heir, understood?"

"You have been very clear."

And then he was gone, into the rain, and I stood in the doorway of the church, feeling like the world was not the same place it had been when I had woken that same morning.



Father and I travelled in silence, and he left me at the entrance to the Castle.

"I'll write to you," I promised, even though he did not ask.

He nodded stiffly. "I shall see you in due course, I am sure."

And then he was gone, and it felt like the last thread holding me to my childhood had disappeared too. He had always been distant - certainly since Mother had died, anyway, but to say farewell with so little fanfare hurt a little.

I brushed the feeling aside, walking the familiar path to the maidens' dormer.

I had hoped to come and go with little fuss, but most of the women were in there, gathering their sewing after lunch. It was full of chatter, which stopped when I entered.

"Lady Alice," Jane said. "Or should I say Lady Danley?"

I held my head high and made my way to my bed, where I had already packed my belongings. I thanked God that Christopher had turned up at the altar; how mortifying it would have been to have had to come back here and unpack in front of all of them.

"Congratulations," said Ella, who I had got on with well, and I smiled and thanked her softly.

"Where are you to live?" asked another girl, and I explained we were to ride to Chichester Place that afternoon.

"You'll be wanting some privacy!" a voice said, and a titter spread through the room. I felt my cheeks blush at their insinuations, as I checked to make sure I had not forgotten anything. It wasn't much to show for my life, but I had left many of my belongings at our home in Dorset, before we had come to live at Court.

I supposed I could send for some of those things, once Christopher and I had settled somewhere - but for now this small collection of clothes, books, jewellery and sewing would have to do.

"Perhaps they've already had time in private," Jane's voice rang out over the room. "Hence the rather speedy marriage..."

Anger boiled inside of me as I began to understand her meaning. My head turned sharply towards her, the rage I felt surely obvious in my eyes, and I saw the smirk freeze on her face.

Just as I was about to retort - although what I would have said, other than denying her suggestion that I were anything but an innocent, I did not know - the door opened.

And Queen Katherine stepped in.

Everyone stopped and curtsied, not voicing how unusual it was to see the Queen in this chamber.

"I was wondering where everyone was," she said with a smile. "But I see they wished to bid you farewell, Lady Danley. My felicitations on your marriage."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," I said, focussing on her smile and ignoring everyone else around us.

"We hope to see you back at Court soon."

I nodded, and held the smile on my face as she swept from the room, followed by the rest of the ladies.

Even Jane did not stop to say another nasty word, and I let my anger seep away. I was leaving this place for good; even if I came back as a lady, it would no longer be to share the maids' dorter with her. I was a married woman - and I was happy about that, even if it meant leaving everything I'd ever known.

Chapter Twelve

Christopher

I waited for her outside the Queen's chambers, after I had vacated my rooms at the local inn. It had not taken long, and my belongings were already strapped to the saddlebags of a borrowed horse. I presumed she would not have too many belongings here; if she did, we would need to hire a carriage, or have them sent on later. But she appeared moments after this thought with two bags, which could easily be affixed to her horse.

I was assuming she was a confident rider; once again, I realised how little I knew.

"Ready?" I asked, and she nodded, taking my arm when I offered it and handing me one of the bags, although I would have happily taken both. "Do you need to see your father, before we depart?"

"No," she answered. "We have said our goodbyes."

I nodded, guiding her towards the courtyard where I had left the horses. I wondered if her farewell had been as stilted as mine; I doubted it.

"Are you happy to ride for an hour?" I asked her, not really sure what I would do if she said no.

"Of course," she said, giving me that look that made me feel an idiot again. The horses were saddled, one with a side saddle, and I gave her my arm as she used the stool to mount. Once our bags were attached I dug my heels in, and the borrowed horse began to move.

I took it slowly, ensuring Alice did not fall behind, and racked my brains for what we could discuss. Our impending wedding night? Hardly. How little we knew of each other? That too seemed awkward. And so for a long while our journey was silent, save for the clicking of the horses' hooves against the stone.

The path opened up, straight and flat before us, and Alice began to pull ahead. The sun had deigned to join us, and for a moment I

watched as she urged the horse faster, keeping her balance despite the luggage strapped to each side.

Oh, she could ride - and I laughed at myself that I had ever doubted it. She was, it seemed, accomplished in many things - and riding was one of them. With a thrill in my heart I pushed forward to catch up with her.

"You like to ride?" I said, and saw her eyes sparkling and a smile on her lips.

"When I can," she said. "Do you?"

"I prefer a ship," I said. "But a horse is a good second!"

She laughed at that, and I felt a lightness in my heart I had not expected. Perhaps this marriage would not be as wearisome as I had anticipated.

Chapter Thirteen

Alice

We arrived with the sun still shining weakly in the sky, and I felt a dull ache as I dismounted. It had been a long time since I had ridden so far; the Queen was not particularly enamoured with riding, and it seemed these days the King rode out with his mistress, Anne Boleyn - so there was little call for me to ride regularly. As much as I enjoyed it, my body was clearly not prepared for it.

We entered a buzzing house, full of staff cleaning and pulling out furniture. Clearly they'd had warning of our arrival - but not enough warning to have finished their tasks. They hurried out upon seeing us, with one congratulating us before disappearing, leaving us alone.

I stood before him in the Great Hall, and waited.

All my life, men had decided what I must do. And then I was put in the service of a woman - but she too, was beholden to a man, despite being the Queen of England.

So I waited for this man, who now had rights to anything that was mine, to say what we should do.

"This must all seem very fast to you," he said, running a hand through his hair and giving me a sheepish smile. "It does to me, anyway."

Oh.

I had not expected such... such honesty. I had expected bravado, and more of the bawdy jokes I had heard as I had collected my belongings. I had held myself tall then, Lady Danley, no longer a maid - but I did not know how I would respond if such lascivious words dropped from Christopher's lips.

"Lord Danley-"

He took a step towards me. "Christopher. Or - well, my close friends call me Kit. But definitely not Lord Danley."

"Kit." I tried out the word, and saw him smile as I did so. "Yes, it has all been... a whirlwind."

"Shall... shall I call for a meal to be served? And some wine, perhaps? It has been a long time since I have stayed here, they shall have to prepare rooms I am sure..."

I swallowed, sure I was blushing at even the thought of rooms above us with beds in, and nodded. "A meal would be good."

He gently placed my arm in the crook of his, and led me to sit at a grand table. The whole house was grand, although the style was not particularly modern. Still, it was beautiful and spacious and if we were to have children, the gardens looked wonderful for them to run around in.

For a moment I could imagine it, even though I missed the hustle and bustle of Court. I could imagine a quiet life with a book and a roaring fire and a brood of children.

And a husband, I supposed. A husband I was not going to fall in love with.

Did I need to tell him that? Was that something discussed by spouses? Could I say - *I know nothing of the bedchamber and I plan to never fall in love?*

It seemed, currently, I could find no words, and I was glad when a goblet of wine was placed before me, giving me an excuse to fill my mouth with the sweet liquid instead of thinking of something to say.

"It was kind of your father, to gift you this home," I finally said."

"Us. He gifted it to us, Alice, and... I'm not sure my father has ever done anything kind. But it was useful, certainly."

"Do you not get along with your father?" I asked, my words emboldened a little from the wine.

He smiled, although it did not quite reach his eyes, and leaned back in the ornate wooden chair.

"You could say that."

"But what would *you* say?" His avoidance of the question was infuriating.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I would not have asked if I didn't."

He sighed, and took a long drink of his wine before opening his mouth again. In that moment, I wondered on the wisdom of speaking my mind so soon after we were wed. Before the union had even been consummated...

"No. We do not get along. He does not like the way I have chosen to live my life, and I... well, I do not understand many things about the way he has chosen to live his."

"Your... your travel, you mean?"

He nodded.

"I think it sounds marvellous," I said, regretting the words almost instantly. His eyes lit up, but he said nothing more on the subject, and when food was brought to us it provided a welcome distraction.

"Do you get along with your father?" he asked, and I paused for a moment. Did I? No-one had ever asked the question, and so the answer was not ready on my tongue.

"We do not see each other often," I finally said.

"But you both live at Court? Or you did, should I say."

"We did," I said with a nod. "But we were both very busy. Since my mother died..." I paused again, trying to make the words sound as detached as possible. It felt like I was sharing secrets that were not mine - but this man, my husband, had asked... and these were the honest answers. "He has liked to keep busy."

"I am sorry about your mother," he said, softly.

"Thank you. It has been a while now, but the loss of one's mother..."

"Mine died at my birth," he said suddenly. I had not realised this; I knew the Earl's wife lived in another house somewhere up country, but I did not know she was not Christopher's mother.

"I am so sorry," I said.

He shrugged. "I did not know her. But... since we were sharing..."

I thought the look in his eyes was one of pain, despite his words - but did not know him well enough to ask, and so the subject moved on.

"Did you know?" he asked, when the silence had been dragging for a little too long. "When I saw you at Court, the other day?"

"Did I know what?" I was stalling for time, for I understood his question - but I had no idea what my answer should be.

"That our fathers planned for us to wed?"

I blushed, then nodded.

He threw his head back and laughed, and I found my body twisting with tension at the unexpected reaction.

"Pray, what is so funny?"

"We argued about that translation! You must have rued the day you heard my name!"

And I smiled, because of course there was a little truth to that - not that I could say those words.

"Did you... did you not know?"

"Not your name," he admitted. "I do not think I should have hidden it as well as you did, though!"

"I did not mean to hide it!" I said, forgetting to guard my words. "I just did not know... what the protocol was."

"The protocol for telling someone you are going to be betrothed to them?" He ran a hand through his hair once more. "No, I suppose that is not so simple to navigate."

When had he learned my name, I wondered? That morning when he arrived at the church? Or sometime before?

Had no-one thought it important for him to know the name of the woman he was to marry?

Candied fruits were brought in, and I smiled at the young woman who brought them. She turned to Christopher, and spoke softly - but I could still hear.

"The rooms are ready, my lord - the Earl and Countess's old

rooms."

"Thank you, Bertha."

Rooms. Were we to have separate rooms? Would we consummate the marriage this evening? Where would we consummate it? Questions ran through my mind, leaving me breathless and melting my appetite to nothing.

As my mind became preoccupied with other things, the conversation petered out, and suddenly the meal seemed to be over, without me truly remembering what I had eaten.

"Are you all right?" he asked, and I did not have an honest answer that could pass my lips. "Alice?"

I nodded, a lie. "Yes, my l- Christopher."

"Perhaps... perhaps we should prepare for bed."

I gulped. Indeed we should; a marriage unconsummated was a marriage that could be annulled. And that would make our fathers very unhappy indeed. But oh, how I wished Mother had been able to at least tell me something of the marriage bed, of what I was supposed to do and say and wear. I was not used to feeling so unsure; I liked to be prepared.

"Of course," I said, standing as he helped pull out my chair, and taking his arm when it was offered. Together we climbed the wooden staircase, and Christopher pushed open a door that led to a suite of rooms. A small living area, with two bedrooms off to the side.

"Which is yours?" I asked, itching to break the silence that was making me even more nervous.

"Well, I have only stayed here when it was my father's house, not mine - so my room was always down at the end of the hall." He smiled. "But the Earl's room is that one-" He pointed to the door on the right, "So I suppose that is mine, and the one on the left yours."

A knock on the door to the living area made me jump, and I turned to see Bertha coming in with a tray.

"Your wine, m'lord."

"Thank you."

She set it down and disappeared, and then once again we were totally alone.

"Shall we sit, for a moment?" Christopher said, loosening his doublet a little and looking almost as awkward as I felt. "And have some wine?"

I nodded, and he passed me a goblet before sitting down on the padded bench by the window. The setting sun provided a beautiful backdrop, and before I joined him I took a moment to look at the grounds which stretched into the darkening distance.

"I will show you the grounds tomorrow, if you like," he said, and I nodded.

"That would be nice."

Once more he ran a hand through his hair, leaving it messy and wild; I had noticed him doing it all day.

"This is a bit strange, is it not?" he said, as I sat beside him and took a deep breath.

Once again, he surprised me with his honesty.

"The wine?" I asked with a smile, knowing that he was not referring to the delicious spiced drink in our hands.

"Not the wine," he said, matching my smile. "We do not know each other... and yet we are husband and wife."

I looked to the floor. "It is all a little surreal."

"You don't need to be nervous." My eyes shot up at those words, and met his; I was shocked by the jolt in my stomach as I looked into those dark eyes.

"I don't?" I asked, my mouth feeling dry in spite of the wine.

"We don't... we don't have to consummate the marriage tonight. We have only just met, really..."

"You don't wish to?" I asked, wishing I knew exactly what I was asking, wishing I knew whether this was a slight to me and my looks, or him being considerate of my feelings.

He blushed, and the sight made my whole body feel like it had

been set alight.

What was this man doing to me?

Chapter Fourteen

Christopher

Did she not know what she asked? I had learned she had no mother, and so I wondered how ignorant she was of what was expected of us this night. Did I want to? Of course I did. I was a man, for one, and she was a beautiful woman. But there was something more, I had to admit; a spark I felt that was not just because I was a man alone with a woman.

Something about Alice herself.

"Oh, I definitely wish to," I said, knowing there was a smirk on my face but unable to wipe it off. "But I will wait, if you wish. We have plenty of time..."

"No."

Her response shocked me, and I felt the atmosphere in the room change imperceptibly.

"We are married, and marriages must be consummated." She blushed scarlet, but her words were clear, and I nodded, agreeing with her. If that was what she wished...

"I feel I should tell you," she said, swirling her wine around so much I worried she would spill it all on the floor. "That I have no plans to fall in love with you. This marriage is a contract, and I hope we shall be happy and blessed with children - but I have seen what love does, and I have no plans to succumb to it."

I coughed out a half-laugh, half-snort as her words filled the air around us. "And I have no intentions of making you fall in love with me!" I said, a little incensed. How could she declare that she would not fall in love? "I need to sire an heir. That is what this marriage is for."

"Well. Good. We are on the same page."

"Indeed." I took a sip of wine to calm my racing heart. It was

racing for all the wrong reasons though - surprise, and anger, and frustration. This did not seem like the best prelude to lying together for the first time. Her first time with a man, and I had at least hoped to make the experience a little romantic. That was why I had suggested waiting; she had seemed so nervous all through dinner, and I had felt uncomfortable being the cause of that.

But if it was a business contract to her, I supposed romance did not really figure in her plans.

"Shall we?" I said, offering my hand, and she paused before accepting it, putting down the goblet a little harder than necessary on the wooden table.

I led her to the room that would now be mine, with its impressive oak four-poster bed in the centre. The fire was lit, and I let go of her hand to light a few candles, to counter the dying light from the window.

"Has anyone told you what to expect?" I asked, feeling odd to talk so matter-of-factly about an act so intimate.

She shook her head.

"Can I undress you?"

Her mouth fell open, and for a moment I thought she would refuse; and then she nodded.

I felt respect for her blossoming in my chest; she was certainly brave.

She turned, and by the light of the candles I unlaced her kirtle and sleeves, letting each garment fall to the floor as I did so. Tomorrow, I would look to securing a maid to help her dress and fix her hair, but for tonight we could make do as just the two of us.

When she wore just her shift, I quickly divested myself of most of my garments, leaving me in just my hose, before leading her to the bed. She climbed into the middle, her petite frame dwarfed by the sizeable wooden structure, and kept her eyes resolutely on my face.

I climbed on to join her, taking her hands in mine, leaning my head to press my lips to hers, just for a moment. Then my hands moved to her waist, feeling the shape of her through the thin fabric, feeling the room grow warmer around us as our breath mingled. I

gently moved her so we were lying down, side by side, my hand still on her waist, feeling the warmth of her skin.

"It may hurt," I murmured, pressing a kiss to her neck, revelling in how she closed her eyes to the new sensation. "A little. But I promise it will feel wonderful, too."

She nodded, her teeth worrying at her bottom lip, her chest rising and falling more rapidly than when we had entered this room.

Nerves? Or anticipation?

"I don't like not knowing what I am doing," she admitted.

I smiled; somehow, that did not surprise me. "I'll show you," I promised. "Will you trust me?"

And I don't know what made her decide she could, but she nodded, before squeezing her eyes closed. "Can we get it over with?"

I could not help my laugh at that, and I moved so that she was between my legs, her body close to mine although not bearing my weight. It almost felt like a challenge - could I make her forget her worries, her nerves, her desire to get it over with, and instead have her lost in passion?

I thought I could.

"Desire," I said, my voice becoming lower, "Is not something to rush."

I pressed a kiss to the side of her throat again, where she had seemed to enjoy it earlier, and sure enough saw her skin flush pink. Another to the other side, slightly lower, then grazing her collar bone, then the swell of one breast.

She closed her eyes, whether through embarrassment or desire I did not know. It had been a long time since I had taken my time so thoroughly with a woman, and I found I was enjoying myself far more than I could imagine. She was beautiful, laid out on the bed, her pale skin tinged pink and her brunette hair slipping from its careful coiffure. I took a moment to remove the pins, running my hands through her silky locks and sending them streaming onto the pillows.

Next I turned my attention to her hands, pressing kisses to each palm, before returning to those lips that begged to be kissed.

"You're beautiful, Alice," I said, and her eyes snapped open and met mine. For a moment I thought she would challenge me, but then she smiled, and closed her eyes again.

Slowly, so slowly I thought I might combust, my fingertips trailed down her side, lifting her shift as I did so. I thought I saw her eyes squeeze more tightly shut, but it was the only indication that she realised I was, indeed, 'getting on with it'.

Lightly, my fingertips swirled patterns on the delicate flesh of her thighs, and I smiled as she gasped quietly.

As I allowed myself to explore between her legs, her skin flushed a darker shade of pink, and a sweet moan escaped her lips. Still her eyes stayed shut, but she responded to my movements with such positivity that I struggled to contain my own desire.

"Tell me to stop," I managed to say, my voice husky, "If you want me to stop." I could offer her that, even if I did not know what kind of husband I would make. I could give her the control, even though I was so ready for her I did not know how I would make myself stop.

I waited until she was writhing beneath me, gasping and panting with far less apprehension now, to position myself. She opened her eyes at my stopping, with a questioning look, but soon shut them again as I removed my last garment.

Chapter Fifteen

Alice

I could not believe the twists and turns this day was taking. I had not expected to feel the pleasure that he had given me, and even less to desire... something. What it was, I did not know, and when I saw him completely nude, I shut my eyes in panic. How on Earth could that work?

He had said I could tell him to stop, but I found myself loathe to do so. Not just because of the chance of an annulment, but because he was making me feel things I had no idea were possible. And he was a beautiful, strong man - and he was my husband. As embarrassing as it felt, there was nothing wrong with wanting these things from a husband.

I gasped loudly as he pushed into me, a foreign feeling that quite took my breath away. He moved slowly, and while there was not exactly pain, it was not a comfortable feeling.

He paused, and I felt my breathing slow a little, becoming used to this intrusion. It was not so bad, I reasoned; and perhaps the pleasure his fingers had created earlier would be continued.

And then he pushed further, and I felt a sharp pain that made me shout.

"Alice? I'm sorry, I'll-"

"Wait." He went to pull away from me, but I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes and willed the pain away. I knew this must be completed; knew there was something in this act which led to children being created, and marriages being insoluble.

He had said it might hurt; I had thought my tolerance for pain higher than it apparently was.

"Alice?" His voice again, caring, soft, and I opened my eyes to find his dark eyes very close to mine. "Are you all right?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. He pressed his lips to my throat again, which sent that delicious thrill through my body once more, and then began to move slowly, in and out. At first there was pain, and I tried very hard not to let that show - because it seemed he was actually concerned for my welfare.

I was not sure that was something I had expected.

His breathing became more laboured, and I suddenly realised I was no longer gritting my teeth. The pain had dissipated, and what was in its place felt suspiciously like the pleasure I had briefly enjoyed earlier. That knot in my stomach began to wind deliciously once more, and when he shifted slightly I groaned for completely positive reasons.

"Alice?" he said, pausing.

"Don't stop," I implored him, shocked at my wantonness - but he didn't hesitate any longer, and I found the world getting hazy as the air filled with gasps and groans that belonged to both of us at the same time.

It was like an explosion of white heat inside me, radiating through my body as he groaned above me. It almost sounded like he said my name again, and then he rolled off to my side, chest heaving as he took in the air he needed, and I tried to calm my own breaths.

I was a married woman, in every way there was.

He turned to me, a bashful smile on his face, and I felt a panicked jolt as I realised I was smiling too.

So many things about this marriage were unexpected; I felt I needed a long, quiet walk to be able to contemplate them, to understand my feelings and where I really stood in this relationship.

"Are you all right?" he asked, and despite my reservations, I answered honestly.

"Wonderful," I whispered. "Are you?"

His smile widened, and he threw an arm over my naked form, clearly ready for a long sleep.

"Wonderful, Alice. Wonderful."

Although Christopher fell into a deep sleep beside me, I stayed awake, my eyes fixed on the beautiful canopy above us. His breathing was steady and slow, but mine felt as fluttery as a moth's wing.

The blanket had been pulled over us by one of Kit's strong hands before he had fallen into his slumber, but beneath it I was well aware that we both wore nothing. I wondered if I should feel embarrassed, except the knowledge of all the things we had done in the last hour made our simple nakedness seem little to make me blush. But I did blush as I thought of the way our bodies entwined, of the glorious way he had made me feel, of the desperation I had felt for him in that moment.

Was this love?

The thought sneaked up on me, unbidden, and it took me a moment to process.

No, it was not. For one, I had sworn never to fall in love - and I did not break my oaths. Secondly, I had known him for such a short amount of time, it would not be possible to fall in love.

It was passion, pure and simple. People went to crazy lengths for passion, did they not? I had always thought them stupid, and easily led - but after tonight, I supposed I was a little more understanding of those who lost their minds in the pursuit of desire.

And physical intimacy - however desirable it might be - did surely not equate to love. After all, I had heard the rumours at court of husbands cheating on wives. The King himself - although of course I would never utter the words to another living soul - had many mistresses. Did he love them all? Did he still love his wife?

My thoughts did not make sleep any easier, and when I turned I remembered who shared my bed. For a moment I lay there mesmerised, his dark hair falling into his eyes, his bare chest rising and falling in a hypnotic pattern. He looked relaxed in sleep, as though he had no cares in the world, and I wondered how he felt about having a wife. About me being his wife.

Would he stray?

I felt a tug in my chest; why did it matter? As long as I could bear him children, we would both be living up to our ends of the bargain, would we not? As long as he did not make a fool of me.

As my eyes drifted into a fitful sleep, I was left with the uncomfortable notion that I would be very bothered indeed if he were to lie with another woman as he had done with me.

Chapter Sixteen

Christopher

The room was dark when my eyes opened, and it took me a moment to remember where I was - and whom I was with. It had been a while since I had woken up with a woman beside me, and even longer since I had done so in a nice bed - but when the light of the moon illuminated her face, the memories of the previous day hit me. I was a married man; she was my wife.

And she was beautiful.

I watched her in the moonlight, her brow furrowed despite her deep sleep. She looked troubled, and I found that bothered me. Was it our marriage? Or something else? I knew so little about her, despite the fact that we had bound ourselves together for eternity.

She had remained completely nude, and I ran my fingertips gently down her arm, before tucking the blanket up higher when I realised her skin was cold. I supposed I should go to the other bed - although this was my chamber, officially. Husbands and wives slept apart, did they not, when they lived in a house like this? When they married for reasons that were nowhere near to love, or even desire?

But I found I did not want to leave. I watched her in the moonlight, the way her eyes flickered behind their lids as she dreamed, and I wondered what she was dreaming of.

Was she regretting this union? I was fairly sure she'd had as little say in the matter as I - well, as a woman, probably even less say. But she had consented, and she had come to my bed willingly and enthusiastically. A smile spread across my lips as I remembered how well we had come together. I had not expected to desire my wife so, to be well matched in the bedchamber, as well as in a battle of wits.

Perhaps my father had done me a favour; it seemed somehow, without knowing the young woman at all, he had picked a wife who I might actually be happy with.

I drew her closer to me, feeling her cold body sink into mine, as I

drifted back to sleep. Separate beds could wait; this was our wedding night, and for tonight I would enjoy the warmth (or something akin to warmth) of another human's form before facing the world again tomorrow.

Chapter Seventeen

Alice

It was two weeks into life as a married woman when Kit received a letter from Court. It was brought to him at breakfast, and he opened the seal, exclaiming to me, "It's from the King!"

My eyebrows rose; as much as I found the King's actions deplorable, the fact that he was sending a letter to my husband was of course a great honour.

"What does he say?"

"There is to be a joust, to celebrate Easter. He knows we are recently married, but is keen for me to join the sport."

I remembered seeing him joust before, when he had asked for my favour; he had not known then, that I would be his wife. There was something to be said for sitting in the crowd and watching one's husband in jest combat with the King of England. Would he ask for my favour again? We had lain together every night since our marriage, and what little we said to each other in the day was certainly made up for by the noise we created in that bedroom. The Countess's chambers had been largely forgotten; we made love in the bed we slept in, and there had been no further discussion of the matter.

I could not admit aloud that I liked falling asleep next to him, and waking up in his arms; but it was true.

"What an honour," I said, smiling across the table to him.

"Indeed. Are you happy for us to return to Court for a few days, for the festivities?"

I nodded my head; even if I weren't, I would not disagree. Besides, I could see my father, and perhaps even the Queen. Although I was not ready to request to be her lady once more... for some reason, I wished for a little more time in Kit's company.

He smiled that boyish, excited smile at me, and I could not help

but return it.

"Wonderful. I'm sure there'll be a dance too - and then we can return here, yes?"

"Of course, husband." I thrilled at the word, even without wanting to.

He pushed back his chair, jumping up. "I shall arrange for our luggage to be packed. We shall leave this afternoon - and I shall send word to request lodgings."

I finished my food alone, with a smile on my face at his exuberance. It would be nice, to go back to where I had lived for so long - and to be seen as a wife, and not just as a girl.

Chapter Eighteen

Christopher

Two weeks with Alice had been somewhat of a revelation. During the day she worked with the staff to discuss renovations to the house; she perused the gardens and spoke with local villagers, and got to know the place better than I ever had done.

I rode, and I fished, and I met with the local landowners to ensure that this home Father had given me was profitable, and could remain so.

We barely saw each other all day - and yet at night, we could not be kept apart.

Dinner was agonising torture, a prelude to making it up those stairs and tumbling into bed with my wife. At dinner we ate and made polite conversation about our day's adventures - but at night I felt my soul was as bare as the rest of me.

We made love no matter whether we had gone to bed early or late. We made love in firelight, candlelight, moonlight, and one morning in the rising sunlight. She moaned my name, calling me Kit, and I shouted hers, and our bodies entwined as close as two people could ever become.

And yet in the morning, when one of us woke and untangled the mess of limbs beneath the blankets, it was like we were different people. She called me Christopher, or avoided using my name, and the conversation was never amusing, or flirtatious, or even argumentative. We got on absolutely fine, without a spark of anything interrupting us.

But the nights...

As I packed, I wondered if that would remain the same at Court. She would of course want to see her father, and friends, and perhaps visit a dressmaker since we would be so close to so many. I only hoped our nights could remain the same. As honoured and excited as I was to take part in the King's Easter joust, I was enjoying marriage far more than I had ever expected; I did not want to change the dynamic

and ruin what we had.

Chapter Nineteen

Alice

The day was beautiful and the ride pleasant. In the two weeks we had been married, I had begun to ride in the beautiful countryside, visiting local villages and learning about the area. I did not know if we would be staying permanently at Chichester Place, but it seemed a good use of my time, just in case. I found I did not really miss the city - at least not as much as I had feared.

I glanced over to my husband, tall and steady on his black horse. He was humming a tune I did not recognise, and it was a good job my own horse knew the way, for I was not paying much attention to the path in front of me.

His dark hair fell in every direction, and somehow I had come to think of it as endearing, instead of messy and in need of a good trim. It looked the same whether he was out on his horse or in the heat of passion, and the thought made me blush. His hands, so large and calloused from years of work at sea, held the reins loosely, his trust firmly placed in the horse to carry him safely to our destination.

"Tell me a story," I said suddenly, realising I needed to stop staring at the fine form of my husband.

"A story?" he said, his eyebrows raising a little, a smile on his face.

"Of your adventures. I have never left England, as I'm sure you know."

He smiled; "Most people haven't."

"But you have," I said pointedly. "And I should like to hear of it."

He paused for a moment, and I wondered if he would deny my request, but then he set off into a tale that had me enraptured by the words as well as his deep, smooth voice.

"We were sailing somewhere near Jamaica, with the sun beating

down on us and a boat load of spices to bring home," he said, as if his words weren't magical and enchanting, "When we were set upon by pirates."

"Pirates?" I said, unable to withhold my gasp.

He nodded slowly. "Pirates. They were as terrifying as the tales say. Long hair, long beards, skills with a sword and a knife I had never seen. They killed anyone in their way, and looted every barrel and chest we had."

"How did you get away?" I asked, feeling like a child being told a bedtime story. Except I had never really been told bedtime stories; I had learned to read, and then I had found tales of adventure to indulge in myself.

"I chose not to argue. They could take the money and spices and whatever else we had aboard - I felt none of it was as important as my life." He gave a shrug; "They left, although not without knocking a few holes into our sails and the side of the galleon. Left us sinking in the middle of the ocean, with a reduced crew - and off they went."

"You were lucky to get out alive!"

He nodded; "I agree. We made it as far as we could without having to abandon ship. We swam, then, to an island - it was too far for some of the crew. I barely made it - only five of us did."

I could picture his strong arms pulling him through the water, his hair wet against his face as exhaustion set in. I felt a sense of panic, even though obviously he had come through this ordeal alive.

"And then?"

"We waited. Luckily, a trade ship passed and was willing to give us passage if we could pay them - and I still had a ring that the pirates had not spotted. It was a long and cramped journey, but eventually we made it back to England."

"Gosh." I let his words sink in for a moment, images of his adventures swirling in my brain. Was this the most dangerous? Or were there many more tales like this, of narrow escapes, of death and terror?

"And yet you still like to travel?"

He laughed; "I do indeed. Not every adventure ends in disaster - and if it does, what a story it makes!"

"Unless you don't come back," I muttered under my breath.

"Well, you see, there's never been anybody who has been too bothered about that."

I fixed him with a stare for a moment, before looking back at the road.

"I'm sure your father would have been bothered."

He shrugged; "Would he pay a ransom? I'm not so sure."

"But you're his son! And his heir!"

He laughed, a harsh sound that I was not used to. "He has another son - I am most certainly replaceable to him."

I realised with a panic that he was not replaceable to me. I did not want to be a widow; I wanted to be a wife.

His wife.

When on Earth had that feeling snuck up on me?

Chapter Twenty

Christopher

We arrived at the Palace in daylight, and I took a deep breath of the spring air. It was certainly not as fresh here in the city as back at Chichester Place, but there was an air of excitement around us that was infectious.

I took Alice's hand, despite having never done that before outside, and led her through the archway. The ride had buoyed my spirits, even if we had touched on difficult topics, and having Alice on my arm made this visit to Court even more exciting.

"Lord Danley!" a voice called out, and I turned to see a page in the King's livery waving a note. "A missive from the King, my lord."

"Thank you," I said fishing in my pocket for a coin for the lad before opening the note. I grinned, and turned to Alice. "We have been offered one of the King's most magnificent guest suites!"

"He must really like your jousting," she said with a grin, and I laughed.

"Indeed!"

The page showed us the way, through winding corridors and past courtiers who generally ignored us - although those who knew either Alice or me sometimes stopped to look or say hello.

I struggled to hide my amazement as we entered the rooms that we had been assigned. The walls were adorned with red and gold hangings, and the ceiling was carved with intricate figures that I was sure came from Greek mythology. In the centre of one wall was the tallest bed I had ever seen, covered in a fine red canopy. Scarlet was clearly the theme, with the chairs similarly decorated, and when the page left us alone I turned to Alice.

"I clearly need to joust exceptionally in this tournament!"

She laughed; "Not too well. It wouldn't do to beat the King!"

I smiled and did not comment, although we both knew I would let the King win if necessary. He was an impressive jousting knight, although he had ten years on me and his fondness for rich food was certainly apparent.

"These rooms are magnificent," she said, running a fingertip along the velvet of one chair.

"They are indeed." We both came from wealth, but I doubted either of us had ever slept in rooms as fine as these.

Suddenly, I wished to enjoy them together - and not wait for that magical time once the sun had set.

"I shall change, before dinner," I said, and she nodded; it would not do to dine covered in dust from the journey.

When I began to remove my shoes, she pulled out clean clothes for both of us from the luggage we had brought.

When I pulled off my shirt, I saw her eyes dart away, and then back again. I grinned; physically, we suited; there was no denying that.

I removed my hose, not shy in the light of the sun that spilled into the room, and she cleared her throat and glanced out of the window.

"Alice," I said, my voice deep. "Don't you need to change?"

Chapter Twenty-One

Alice

He knew what he was doing, I was sure of it. My voice stuck in my throat and my cheeks blushed crimson.

"Uh- yes, I..."

And then he was stood there in nothing at all, his sculpted, muscular form lit by bright sunlight instead of the dim light of the fireplace, and I could not think straight.

"Shall I help you?" he asked, and I nodded mutely, turning to let him unlace my dress. He pressed a kiss to my neck, then every bare piece of skin he uncovered, until my thoughts were a dizzying mess and my knees were not sure they could support me.

"Come to bed," he said, taking my hand as he had done outside, and even though it was day time still, even though this seemed like madness, my body followed him.

"Kit..." I said, as he pulled my shift over my head and threw it to the floor, pulling back the blankets and climbing in.

"Yes, Alice?" he said, giving that smile he always did when I called him by his nickname.

"Should we..."

"We are husband and wife, Alice. There is nothing we cannot do." He gave a cheeky wink as he tugged my hand and I crawled into bed beside him. "Besides, we have an heir to make, do we not?"

I nodded; he was right about that. If the maids spoke truthfully, I would not know for another couple of weeks whether our attempts thus far had been successful, but that was the main reason we were married.

And attempting to make an heir was a rather enjoyable task.

"You are a bad influence, Christopher Danley," I muttered, losing

the ability to form coherent words as his lips moved down my body, exploring everywhere with delicate kisses.

"As I always intended to be," he said with a grin, but I could not even remember what his words were in answer to. Every feeling he inspired was so delicious, and I revelled in it, even if it were in the day time.

And then we moved together and I no longer cared how sumptuous the bed was, or that we were at the palace, or that it was not the dead of night. My thoughts were of Kit, and only of Kit.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Christopher

We helped each other dress in silence, but it was a comfortable silence. I could have fallen asleep next to her beautiful body in that decadent bed, but I knew our presence would be expected at dinner, and whether the King dined in company or not, our absence would be noted.

Besides, the day's activities had me feeling rather famished.

Alice brushed her hair, and instructed me on how to help her pin her hood on; she helped me button my clean doublet and smiled when she was happy with my appearance.

Somehow, dressing each other felt completely natural - as natural as undressing each other, although a little less hurried. I found I could not think of this marriage as the anchor stopping me from travelling; indeed, the more time I spent with Alice, the more I enjoyed her company.

"You look lovely in that dress," I said as we walked down the corridor, her arm on mine, and I enjoyed the feeling her smile and blush gave me.

The din of the Great Hall hit us before we entered; two weeks away and I had already forgotten how loud it could be at court, when all the courtiers gathered to eat. We made our way to the Great Watching Chamber, where we would dine with the other lords and ladies, and I steered her to a space at one of the long tables.

Across from us, I recognised Lord Whistlewaite, and raised my hand in greeting.

"Kit!" he called with a broad smile. "How wonderful. I heard you were married?"

I nodded, unable to keep the smile of my face. "Lady Alice Danley," I said, with a gesture to Alice by my side. "This is Lord Whistlewaite."

"A pleasure," he said, his eyes remaining on her for a few seconds more than I was comfortable with. "Are you residing at Court?"

"Back for the jousting," I said, my stomach rumbling as food began to be served before us.

"Marvellous. I look forward to seeing you compete!"



Replete from a hearty meal and a long day, we retired to our rooms ready for sleep. Christopher changed before me once more, and I let my eyes wander, more confident after the afternoon's activities. His body was lean and muscled, and as he put on a nightshirt I found myself sorry to see so much of his skin covered.

I shook my head, reminding myself that there was much in this world to be preoccupied with other than my husband's body. Tomorrow, I would most probably see the Queen, and the other maids, and that made my stomach churn a little. What would they think of me as Christopher's wife? Would Jane manage to make some cutting comment?

I had no maid of my own yet, and so I removed my hood and jewels before setting to unlace my garments. And then his fingers were in place of mine, gently removing and unpinning until my hair was loose and I was simply in my shift.

Smiling at him in the firelight, I reached over for my nightdress, but he put a hand on top of mine.

"Surely you need rest, my lord, for your big joust tomorrow?" I said, but there was laughter in my voice as I did so.

"I sleep better with you than I ever have before," he said, and there was an honesty there that shocked me, that made me question whether this marriage was indeed simply a business arrangement, as I had always planned.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Alice

I made my way to the seats around the tiltyard alone, for of course Kit was preparing to joust. The nerves I had felt when I had first watched him were nothing compared to this; a sickness in my stomach that had stopped me from eating all morning. I knew he was talented, knew this was an honour, but I also did not want to be a widow - and a part of my mind that I would not quite acknowledge had very strong feelings about Kit not being harmed in any way.

The Queen was in situ, surrounded by her ladies, and I took a breath and made my way over to pay my respects. My gown of black and gold rustled around my ankles and I moved, and my new hood, in the English style Queen Katherine preferred, stood proudly atop my head.

When she spotted me, she beamed, and I felt a warmth in my heart bloom. I swept a deep curtsy, and raised when she greeted me.

"Lady Danley! How wonderful to see you back at Court so soon."

I smiled, noticing the ladies behind her watching on with great interest.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. My husband is taking part in the jousting, so we have returned for the festivities."

"Marvellous," she said, clapping her hands together. "He is a very worthy challenger! Will you sit with us?"

"I would be honoured," I said, taking the only space on the bench, which was unfortunately next to Jane.

"A speedy return indeed," she muttered, and I sighed at the need for these constant snipes.

"We return to Chichester Place after the festivities," I informed her through gritted teeth, then turned to converse with Ella about my new home.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Christopher

Excitement thrilled through my body as I mounted my horse, my armour gleaming and my lance ready. Many other gentlemen were similarly attired, for today was to be a grand joust; not one or two competitors but twenty, with winners facing winners until a champion was crowned. That champion was often the King, but there were occasions when his good friend Charles Brandon would win, or another man in his favour.

We all bowed as Henry entered the waiting area, resplendent in a peacock-blue doublet that was showing above his armour.

"A good day to you all, gentlemen!" he called, and many called back to him. "And what a good day for a joust!"

He was right; the weather was balmy, at least for England, and the sun was not so bright it would impact our vision. My horse whinnied nervously beneath me, eager to begin, and I echoed his wordless sentiments. I wanted to ask Alice for a token; as my wife, it was of course her honour to have, but I wanted to make it clear in front of the Court that she was mine.

It was a compulsion I had never felt before, and did not truly understand, but nevertheless it was there.

I wanted to show her my skill in the tiltyard, then celebrate with her over food, wine and dancing. I wanted to take her back to our chamber and show her my prowess in a very different way.

I wanted her, that much was clear - more than I had ever anticipated I would.

The sounds of cracks and crashes and the crowd ooh-ing and ah-hing washed over me as I waited with nervous impatience to begin. I did not know many here particularly well, so I waited on my own, listening to the roar of the crowd.

"Lord Danley."

I turned, and hastily bowed when I realised the King himself was addressing me.

"Your Majesty."

"I'm so pleased you could join us for this joust - I enjoyed our tournament last month!"

"The honour is mine, Your Grace. And I must thank you for the fine lodgings we have been afforded."

He grinned; "Well, I thought if I were requesting a man leave his home during the first weeks of marriage in order to joust, I should make it worth his while!"

"Danley!" shouted a page. "You're next!"

I bowed to the King.

"Good luck - I want to ride against you, so don't get knocked off!"

I laughed. "I will try my best."

Feeling like the world was at my feet, I entered the tiltyard. The sun shone gloriously, and I basked in the glow of the King's favour. And then I spotted Alice, sat slightly to the left of the Queen, a small smile on her lips, her eyes on me.

I rode over to her, bowing to the Queen as well as I could manage in my armour.

"It is a pleasure to have you and Lady Danley at court," Queen Katherine said, her eyes bright and happy.

"It is our pleasure to be here," I said. "And I hope to entertain you all with the jousting."

I turned my head to Alice, and swept her a knightly bow, a smile on my face. "My lady," I said. "I could not possibly compete without a token of yours to wish me luck."

She blushed, and if we were alone I was sure I would have received a sharp word, but instead she handed me a glove and I made a show of tucking it behind my breastplate, as I had done mere weeks ago when I had no idea she was to become my wife.

I was sure I saw a smile on her face at the action, and I knew all

the other ladies were watching. A couple were already whispering, before I had even left - but I had no issues with making the world see us as a happily married couple.

After all, it seemed like we may well be just that.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Alice

He pulled his visor over his head, and I watched with trepidation as he prepared for the call to charge. I hoped my glove would bring him luck - and although I would not admit it out loud, I was pleased he had asked for my favour once more. He was not in love with me, and I certainly was not in love with him - but the courtly show of love that was indulged here made me feel important. Indeed, it silenced Jane's nasty comments, and I even heard a few people commenting on what a wonderful match we made.

Trying to distract myself from nerves, I looked around to see if I could see Father - but, unsurprisingly, he was nowhere obvious. He tended to prefer his work to entertainments, although I presumed I would see him tonight at the feast and perhaps at the dance later in the week. If not, I would call on him in his office - although I did not know what we would say to one another. Seeing each other twice in a month was frequent for us - but I could not visit Court without seeing him, surely?

The sound of thundering hooves brought me out from my reverie, and I watched as Kit made quick work of his opponent. The challenger's lance shattered into thousands of pieces, and for a moment he simply looked at the space where his weapon had been, before turning and congratulating Kit on a well-fought battle.

But my heart had not time to rest; three more opponents followed, and the clash of wood upon metal, wood against wood and the sickening sound of a man falling from his horse filled the air.

But each time it was not Kit, and I let myself breathe a little easier.

"His Majesty, King Henry!" a page announced, and a trumpet fanfare heralded the entrance of the King. Of course he was magnificent, dressed resplendently as befitted his status - but my eyes did not leave Kit.

That worried me a little, this need to watch him, this desire to be

close to him - but I pushed it away to ruminate upon at another time.

Kit would be pleased to have made it far enough to challenge the King, I knew - but I found myself wishing for the whole thing to be over. The sick feeling in my stomach had not gone away, and I decided I did not care for sports which left me nervous.

They charged at one another, horseflesh and metal and man hurtling through the air, glancing blows off one another's armour.

On the third charge, their lances met in mid air, and I heard a crack - but I could not tell whose lance had broken. Then a horrendous shout, and I launched myself forwards to see Kit gripping his arm, and King Henry pulling off his visor, and then as if the world had been slowed down, I saw Kit fall.

He wasn't knocked; he simply slid down the side of the horse, and landed in a metallic heap on the floor by his horse's hooves.

My heart stopped in my chest, a silent scream on my tongue - and then I ran, picking up my skirts, shoving through the crowd, not stopping as my feet hit the sand of the tiltyard, until I was at the hooves of the two horses.

I did not remember to bow to the King; instead I threw myself on the floor and tried to remove Kit's helmet.

"Kit," I whispered. "Kit?"

He groaned, one hand still against his arm, and I heard a thud beside me.

King Henry stood, his shattered lance in his hand.

"Your Majesty," I muttered, bowing my head, refusing to leave Kit's side.

"Is he badly hurt?" he asked. "I've called for the barber surgeon. My lance - it shattered as it hit his, and then propelled into his arm - I think it must have caught a gap in his armour. I did not intend-"

The most powerful man in the land was telling me he hadn't meant to harm my husband, but I could not look at him. Kit's face was deathly pale, and I whimpered as I saw blood seeping into the sand below him.

I placed my hand on his shoulder, as far away from the potential wound as I could. Feeling useless, I murmured positive words, trying to avoid looking at the puddle of blood that was growing. It could not be good, to lose that much blood from an arm, could it?

Kit's eyes fluttered open, his teeth gritted in pain. "Alice..."

"I'm here. You're going to be okay."

"Okay. Okay."

His eyes closed again and I fought to stop tears from falling. Tears would help nobody - and I would not sit and cry over my husband in front of a crowd.

The pages arrived with a stretcher, easing him on as he groaned loudly. I pressed my fist to my lips to stop myself from being sick, and followed them as they carried him away - the barber surgeon meeting us as we approached the castle.

Once we reached our rooms, a maid following behind us to clear up spatters of blood, Kit was unceremoniously placed on the bed, the pages helping the doctor to pull the armour off.

"You may want to leave, Lady Danley," the surgeon said. "The sick room is no place for a lady."

"I shall not be leaving," I informed him, and he shrugged, before turning to Kit.

Without the armour, he looked so much smaller, and the wound in his arm was much more obvious. His arm had been torn open by the splintered lance, and blood, flesh and wood splints mixed together.

"This must be cleaned and sewn," the doctor instructed. "We must prevent infection, and stop the blood. Fetch wine - plenty of it."

I stood to the other side of the bed, and when Kit opened his eyes I saw fear and pain and wanted to do nothing but soothe it away.

Ignoring my sense of propriety, I climbed onto the bed beside him and took his hand.

"You are strong. You will get through this."

He nodded, and I prayed to God my words were true.

I did not want to be a widow.

I did not want to lose Kit Danley.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Christopher

I swam in and out of consciousness, becoming aware of strong wine being poured down my throat and swallowing it eagerly in the hopes it would numb the pain. The lance must have cut deep, for the white hot pain I felt was unlike anything I had known - and I was no stranger to injuries. A litany of profanity exited my mouth as the surgeon began to move my arm, and I felt strong arms holding me down, and another holding my hand.

Turning my head, I reminded myself of who was sat there; my wife. She had not fled the room at the sight of blood and flesh and the sound of my foul language. This relationship was only a business contract, but she sat there and held my hand and told me I would get through this.

I gritted my teeth and tried to focus on her face and not my arm or the words of those around me, until blackness mercifully closed in on me again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Alice

I thanked God he had blacked out, and so did not seem aware of the needle passing through his skin. I had briefly caught a glimpse and wished I hadn't; now I had to focus on not losing the contents of my stomach, as well as avoiding letting my eyes wander.

Feeling thankful to the maid who cleared the blood around us and threw down fresh rushes to hide any marks, I wished we had never gone to the joust. Things had been good, at home at Chichester Place; they had even been good here, this morning.

What if he did not recover from this? I knew how dangerous infection was, no matter how young and fit one may seem.

A flash of white caught my eye, and I saw the surgeon was now bandaging up his arm with clean, white linen. Now it was safe to look, I could ask him my questions - even though I dreaded the answers.

"How does it look?" I asked, and he glanced up at me.

"Better, now we have cleaned and sewn it. But it's a deep wound, and it is impossible to know if any infection has seeped in. We must pray he does not get a fever."

I swallowed; "And if he does?"

"We can bleed him, or attempt to remove the arm."

"Remove the-" I gasped. "Surely that can't be necessary?"

"If it comes to a choice between his arm or his life, madam, it may well be."

My words died on my lips; of course it could be. My stomach sickened at the turn this day had taken.

"What must I do?"

"There is a poultice you can apply, once the wound starts to heal.

And I have left a tincture to help the pain. For now we must wait to see if the skin heals by itself."

"My thanks," I said, climbing off the bed and smoothing my skirts with one hand, while not letting go of Kit. "I shall have to find where my husband keeps his coin-"

"The King has taken care of it, my lady," he said, dipping his head in a brief bow. He left with a promise to return the next day, and I looked at the passed-out form of my husband in the dying light of the sun.

"Oh Kit," I murmured, slowly extracting my hand from his to help make him more comfortable. "What are we going to do?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Christopher

I awoke to a pitch black room, and it took me a moment to remember where I was. I seemed to be wearing very little, and a searing pain through my arm brought back some unpleasant memories of where I was, and why I was there.

Turning my head, I made out the form of Alice. Even in the darkness, I sensed she was there, and my eyes picked out her hair on the pillow, her hand stretched out towards mine, her chest slowly rising and falling.

With a desperate need for a drink, I tried to sit, and groaned loudly when I realised that doing so was extremely painful. I could not see the injury the King's lance had left under the bandages, but I could surely feel it.

"Christopher?" I had not meant to wake her, but she was soon sat up and blinking at me.

"Sorry," I said, my voice a little harsh from the pain.

"Are you well?"

I laughed, without humour. "No. But it's no worse, I don't think. I just needed a drink..."

"I'll get it."

She rose and poured a cup of water from the jug on the side, handing it to me before helping me sit. I felt like an invalid, pain radiating through me even though the injury was only to one arm. I must have said as much out loud, for of course Alice had an opinion.

"You fell from your horse when you were wounded. You're bound to ache everywhere."

I nodded, but even that hurt. She was doing something in the darkness I could not quite see, and I was about to ask what when a burst of light made it clear.

"I fell asleep and didn't stoke the fire," she explained, rubbing her hands before it. Despite the spring weather outside, this Castle was still cold and damp - especially at night. She glanced at my arm, taking a step towards me. "Does it hurt?"

I nodded; there was no point lying, I had made it very clear I was in pain. "Yes. What did the surgeon say?"

"That you will be fine."

I laughed; "They're never that positive."

"Well, presuming there's no infection in there..."

"Let's hope not."

She was nodding in agreement, and our eyes met for a moment. I saw the flames dancing in her eyes, and then she pressed them closed.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What for?"

I shrugged, then winced. "Getting hurt? Ruining our visit to the Palace?"

"It wasn't your fault," she said softly.

"I chose to joust."

"The King looked as though he felt guilty."

I wondered if I would ever joust again; would my arm fully heal? Let alone jousting, could I hoist a sail? I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind; I was young, there was no reason I should not recover and go back to life as normal. I remembered the King himself taking a fall and everyone believing him to be close to death - but he was still here, and still jousting merrily.

"It was an accident," I conceded.

"Indeed."

"You should go back to sleep," I said.

She surveyed me for a moment, before reaching to press a hand to my forehead. In spite of everything we had done in this bedchamber,

let alone the one at home, the gesture felt surprisingly intimate, and my eyes flickered closed for a moment.

"You don't feel like you have a fever."

"That's good, then."

She nodded; "Will you sleep too?"

"I'll try."

She helped me lay down, and I tried not to wince. Then she returned to her side of the bed, lying down next to me, facing me. For a few moments we were silent, her eyes closed, and I wondered if she had fallen asleep that quickly.

"I cannot possibly sleep with you staring at me."

I smiled; "Sorry. I'll close my eyes."

Another few moments of silence followed - and although I felt like sleep was not coming, I tried to at least relax. I was going to be in this bed for a few days, I was sure - there would be plenty of time to catch up on sleep.

"I thought you were dead," she said, and the words were so sudden my eyes flicked open. "When you fell."

"I'm sorry," I said; there was pain in her voice that I wanted to soothe.

Her eyes opened then, and they looked conflicted - full of emotions I did not quite understand.

"It wasn't your fault. Well, not really. But there was a lot of blood..."

"I can imagine."

"And for a moment I thought you were dead."

"Were you scared?" I doubted she would answer that; this was the most candidly we had ever spoken, wrapped up in the blanket of darkness, but even so... I could not imagine hearing her admit she was scared, especially about something happening to me.

"Yes."

It was quiet, but the word was definitely said - and I could not stop myself reaching out to take her hand. She did not stop me, and I held it close to my chest.

"I'm sorry," I said again, and this time she nodded, and her eyes looked damp with tears.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Alice

Why was I saying this? Why was I feeling this? Marriage was so much more confusing than I could have imagined. There were so many new emotions that I wasn't sure I had ever felt before - and all for a person that, if I were honest, I barely knew. And to rely on somebody you barely knew, to feel fear in case they became hurt or ill or left you... that was a vulnerability I simply wasn't prepared for.

I wasn't sure, now, whether I had really been prepared for marriage at all.

I let my eyes drift closed, feeling his heart beating through the thin shirt he wore in bed, his hand holding mine against its vital rhythm as we both slowly descended into sleep for the second time that night.

Chapter Thirty

Christopher

"Will you read to me?" I asked, propped up in bed by pillows and watching Alice as she moved about the sunlit room, sorting this and that. "I hear you have a wonderful voice for reading aloud." There was a smirk in my tone that I tried - and failed - to keep off my face.

"If you weren't injured," she said, fixing me with a glare that I could imagine would be used very effectively on small children, "I would strike you with this book for mocking me like that."

I went to hold up my hands in innocence, then quickly remembered the pain shooting down one arm and winced as I lowered them. "I'm not mocking," I said in earnest. "I would love to hear you read."

"As long as it's not some terrible translation," she said, her eyebrows raised, and I burst out laughing, unable to stop myself as a knock sounded on the door and the doctor entered.

"Well," he said. "I see someone is feeling much better!"

"It's my wife," I said with a grin. "She is very amusing, and laughter is a wonderful medicine!"

He surveyed Alice as if he did not believe she were amusing, and I wondered how fierce she had been with him the day before when I was drifting in and out of consciousness. "Indeed," he said, and I saw Alice roll her eyes and pull out some sewing. "I am here to look at your wound, Lord Danley. His Majesty has asked me to report on how you are faring."

I focussed on Alice as the surgeon removed the bandages and looked at my arm. Every touch sent pain rippling through me, and so I tried to breathe through it, watching Alice's needle go in and out of the material, setting a pace that I could match with my breaths.

"What are you sewing?" I asked her, and her eyes met mine in surprise before she answered.

"Shirts for the poor," she said. "As the Queen's ladies, we regularly made them - and I suppose it's become a habit."

I nodded, gritting my teeth for a moment as the surgeon prodded me with no concern for the pain it caused.

"Will you sew me a shirt?" I asked, and was pleased to see her smile slightly.

"Of course."

Why was it that such little gestures made my heart soar? It was normal for a wife to sew shirts for her husband - but the fact that she was happy to do so for me made me happier than I could have imagined. Her gentle ministrations this morning as she had applied the salve the doctor had given her had made me feel something I did not think I ever had: cared for. Cherished.

Being the sole focus of someone's care and attention was a wonderful feeling - and one I hadn't realised I had been missing out on.

"Well," the doctor said, replacing the bandages with fresh ones. "You are healing nicely indeed. There is no sign of infection, and the salve seems to be working well. You need to let your arm rest and heal for a couple of weeks - no riding, or anything strenuous, or you may well tear it open again. And be on the look out for a fever. But, I think you have had a lucky escape, Lord Danley. I have seen far worse injuries from jousting."

"Perhaps you should consider not jousting again?" Alice said from the corner, and her revelation the previous night made me seriously consider her words.

"Let me see how I heal," I said, not willing to commit to anything without some further thought. "Can I have some of that liquid for the pain, doctor?"

He nodded, passing the vial, and I took a swig.

"Sleep," he said. "It will pass the time and help the pain. I shall report back to the King, and visit again in two days."



A sharp rap on the door the next day was all that heralded the King's arrival, and when I tried to stand he shook his hand and held out a hand to stop me.

"Please, do not rise on my account. I merely came to ensure you were healing well."

"I am, thank you Your Grace. The doctor is pleased with my progress."

"Good, good. I hope we shall face each other in the lists again - with a little less blood next time!" He laughed, and I joined him, even though the action made my body ache. I could feel Alice's displeasure without turning to face her, and I only hoped the King did not notice the glare she was surely giving him.

"I am sure I will be fully recovered soon," I reassured him.

Alice had made her way to my side, and bobbed a curtsy. I knew her well enough to know that she was not happy with the King, but she was, of course, unfailingly polite.

"My wife, Lady Danley," I said, and watched as the King's eyes flicked to her, resting first on her face, and then moving down her body in a way that made anger flare up in my stomach.

"It is a pleasure, Lady Danley," he said.

"The honour is mine," Alice responded.

"I recognise you..." King Henry said, and I wondered how much effort it took for Alice to not roll her eyes.

"I waited upon Her Majesty the Queen, before my marriage," she said. "And my Father works in your service - the Viscount Bellemonde."

The King clapped his hands together in glee. "Of course! Well, I am pleased to see you settled and back at Court - even if the jousting did not go according to plan! You are most welcome here."

"You are very gracious, Your Grace," she said, and I could not miss the way Henry's attention was no longer on me, but solely on my beautiful young wife. He had a reputation with women - everyone knew he was not faithful to his wife, and had not been for a long time. There were also numerous men who had been cuckolded by the King, and could say nothing about it; I had no plans to join their ranks.

"I thank you for your kindness, Your Majesty, and hope we will return to our home before long."

His eyes moved back to mine, and there was still a smile on his lips. "Well, don't stay away for too long. It's good for the Court to be full of young, vital people such as ourselves!"

I kept all thoughts of the King's age and vitality to myself and simply agreed with him - but found myself breathing a sigh of relief when he left, closing the door behind him.

"We should leave, as soon as I am able to ride," I said, and although I did not give any explanations, she did not disagree. I hoped she was as keen as I was to return to our little bubble away from the city - and even if she wasn't, I knew she was no fan of the King's attentions.



Dinner was brought to us again, and I watched as Alice cut my bread and meat for me, so I could eat one-handed. I tried to remember when someone had last made such an effort for me - but I found I could not. Memories of being ill were mainly from my childhood, and I remembered a maid had once brought me sweets to cheer me up. But I did not recall anyone going to the lengths Alice did to make sure I was comfortable, and that I was healing.

She ate sat at a small table, while I remained in the bed. As dancing held no real joy for me while my arm was healing, there seemed no reason for us to stay at Court once I had healed enough to travel. Despite the luxurious surroundings, I found myself missing our bed in Chichester Place.

"Did you see the King much, when you waited up the Queen?" I asked as I sipped the goblet of wine she had left on the table next to me.

"More when I first came into her service," she said. "More recently, not so much. He does not seem to have much of a memory for the names of women."

I laughed; "You hid your ire well!"

She shrugged, but there was a smile playing on her lips. "It does not do to displease the King of England."

"No," I agreed. "Queen Katherine seems like a good woman, from what I have seen of her."

She nodded fervently; "She was a wonderful mistress. She is kind, and loyal, and she does not deserve-" She stopped herself suddenly, her eyes widening, and had I been closer I would have laid a hand upon her arm.

"You do not need to modify your words around me, wife," I said, reaching for more bread. "You can trust me."

Chapter Thirty-One

Alice

I took a moment to process his words, knowing I had very nearly bad-mouthed the King. That I had let my guard down so much in front of Kit made nervous butterflies fill my stomach.

"Can I?"

He nodded; "Of course. We are married; I would not betray you."

Had Henry promised Katherine that, when they married? Had he sworn to love and protect her, not envisaging the day when he would seek pleasure in another woman's arms, driving a dagger through her heart as she watched the man she loved love so many others?

The terrifying part was that I wanted to trust him. I wanted to believe that we were a team, together against the world, and that he would never betray me.

But he was a man, and men could not be trusted. For all his words of trust and safety now, there was no way of knowing whether he would break my heart in the course of our marriage.

And as I realised my heart was very definitely open to being broken, I felt my resolve hardening. Once he was healed, I needed to put some distance between myself and my husband - else I feared I was in very real danger of falling in love with him, and having my heart broken when he eventually wanted somewhere - or someone - else.



"I think we should stay."

He looked up from his food, and I tried to keep my face impassive at the confused look on his face. "Sorry?"

"I think we should stay at Court for a while longer." I had lain awake half the night, thinking about how I could create some distance

between us, so that my heart might feel a little less exposed. And as he had breathed quietly next to me, deep in slumber, I had realised that if we went back to Chichester Place, we would fall into bed and I would forget all the reasons I had always been against falling in love.

Was that what was happening?

"We can attend the dance later in the month, once you have healed. And the Queen asked if I could visit with her, and the King enjoys your company..."

He paused, and I found my eyes focussing on the fullness of his lips as his teeth pressed against them. "If... if that is what you wish, then we can stay a while longer."

"It is what I wish."

I excused myself for a walk, feeling like I could not breathe until I got outside of the palace walls. It was not what I wished - but it was the only way I could see for me to avoid the heartache I knew this path led to.

Wandering into the gardens, I tried to steady my breathing. It had all come as rather a surprise; I had not expected to really even like Christopher, let alone feel this way about him. I had thought it would be easy - a choice to be made to not fall in love, to not open myself up to heartache and heartbreak in that way.

How naive I had been.

I let my fingers trail across the daffodils that had newly bloomed in the garden, letting the spring air wash over me. I would keep myself busy for a couple of weeks - after all, the palace was heaving with people, it shouldn't be too difficult. I hadn't even seen my father yet - perhaps I could fill an hour with him. Half an hour, at the very least.

And then, when we inevitably returned to our home, I would have calmed my mind and my body a little. I could not avoid his bed; we needed to make an heir, after all, and I did not truly want to end that part of our marriage.

Perhaps once I was pregnant, he would be off travelling again anyway; although my heart was sad at the thought, it would probably be for the best.

I turned a corner, and almost knocked straight into King Henry, walking with Anne Boleyn on his arm and a retinue of staff trailing in his wake.

"Oh - Your Majesty. Forgive me." I swept a curtsy; "I was not paying attention to where I walked."

"No harm has been done, Lady Danley," he said, a smile on his face which was not mirrored on Anne's. Today he remembered my name; I was surprised. "How is your husband faring?"

"Much better today," I said, honestly. "I believe we may stay at Court a little longer, and enjoy the festivities, if it pleases Your Grace."

He clapped his hands together. "Very much so! What good news, don't you agree Lady Anne?"

She nodded, and immediately looked away from me. I was not surprised; she had not liked Katherine's preference for my reading, back when we had both served our Queen.

"I shall hope to see you at the dance, Lady Danley," he said, before taking Anne's arm again and heading off towards the rose garden. I remembered belatedly to curtsy, before hurrying off in the opposite direction.

Yes, distance would be a very good thing - even if it meant staying at Court, where morals seemed to be increasingly loose.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Christopher

I watched her interact with the King from our bedroom window, and for a moment I could not help but wonder if he were the reason she wanted to stay. He had clearly found her attractive - although I doubted there was a man alive who wouldn't - and had stopped to talk with her, now, even with the Boleyn woman on his arm, who (rumour had it) was angling to be his Queen.

But then I shook the notion from my head; I did not think Alice would cheat on me. I did not even think she liked the King very much - no more than she had to, as his loyal subject.

Why, then, was she so keen on staying? The day before she had seemed equally keen to return to our new home. Something had changed; I did not feel it was simply the lure of the dances and the feasts.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Alice

Tentatively, I knocked on the door to my father's office, and heard him bark 'enter' before pushing open the great wooden door.

He looked up, and I saw surprise in his eyes before his brow furrowed. "Alice. I did not know you had returned to Court."

I stood awkwardly, wondering if he would invite me to sit. "We returned for the jousting, at His Majesty's request," I said. "But Christopher was injured in the tournament, and is now recovering."

"Ah. I'd heard someone had come off badly. But he'll survive?"

I was a little shocked at his forthright question, but nodded. "I believe so."

"And will you be leaving Court soon?"

"After the Easter celebrations," I said. "Will you be at the dance?"

"I'm very busy," he said, shuffling papers on his desk as he spoke. "But I suppose I shall make an appearance. I shall see you there."

For a moment I waited, before realising that was my dismissal.

"Good day, Father."

"Good day." His head was buried in his books before I had left, and I stepped outside the door and hurried away, finding an alcove to press myself into before letting the tears fall. Why was I surprised that my father had nothing to say to me? It had been like that for years - since Mother had died, and maybe even before that. But why did it hurt now, returning as a married woman, that he did not have time to talk with me, to ask how I was, how I was finding life married to a man I had not known before I had said my vows?

It felt very much like he simply did not care - and that was something I had spent years claiming was not the case. I had always presumed he was grieving Mother, and too busy, and not sure how to

talk with his little girl who was fast growing into a woman.

Perhaps, all along, he just didn't care.

Tears fell from my eyes, marking the stone floors below me with their salty tracks. All I wanted was to go back to my room, to curl up and wallow for an hour or two - to tell Kit how hurt I was.

And there was the problem.

I could not let him in any further; I knew that if I bared my soul to him, I would lose any chance I had of not falling in love with him. I would not have my heart broken by any man - I was stronger than that.

I did not feel stronger than that, as I wept silently in an alcove, afraid to go to my room in case my husband should comfort me.

I felt weak, and tired, and foolish.

But I stayed there until my tears had run their course, and with several deep breaths, returned to the gardens to give my face time to return to its normal, pale colour before it was time to join Christopher for another meal.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Christopher

"How has your day been?" I asked; I was convinced her eyes were red, although she had denied it when she had returned.

"Fine," she said, and I wondered where my opinionated, chatty wife had gone.

"What did you do?" I pressed, and she set down her goblet and seemed to hold back a sigh.

"I went for a walk," she said. "I ran into the King - he asked after your health."

"That was kind of him," I said. At least she had told me of her meeting with the King - surely if there had been anything clandestine about it, she would have hidden it from me?

"He was pleased we are staying for a little longer."

Ah. So she had told him - and there went any chance of changing the plans. Was that why she had done so? I wished my mind was not so full of questions about her motives.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, and I gave a shrug.

"The same. It does not seem like infection has set in, which I'm grateful for."

"As am I," she said, but the formality was still there, and we finished the meal in silence.

When night fell, and Alice had returned from another walk, I decided that there was only one way to close the distance between us.

Once more I removed my clothes before her, and I was gratified to see that her breath still hitched, her face still flushed red, and she still came willingly into my arms.

"Alice," I whispered, as my lips trailed a path down her throat,

feeling her heart speeding up as I got lower. "Alice..."

She moaned in response, no words passing her lips and yet the sounds of pleasure continued to escape. Soon her garments joined mine on the floor, and we moved to the bed, cautious of my injury.

"Are you sure-" Alice asked, her face flushed and her eyes wide with desire.

"I just need to be careful with it," I said. "It will be fine."

She nodded and argued no more, and I tried to keep my wits about me enough to remember not to knock - or use - my arm.

I gasped as we joined together, the sensation heightened after a few days of enforced abstinence, and she paused. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head, a smile on my face despite the effort of staying still.

"No," I murmured, pressing a kiss to the hollow of her throat. "I just missed you."

"Oh." We moved and she closed her eyes and bit her lip, and then wrapped her arms tight around me.

"I missed you too."

Her words surprised me, and then neither of us could think of words, racing towards our finish as though it was the only thing that mattered in the world.

And then when we lay on the bed, sated and sweaty, I wrapped my uninjured arm around her and brushed my lips against her hair. Whatever the distance was between us in the day, here in bed it did not seem to be an issue.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Alice

Why had I said that? I *had* missed him - missed our fiery exchanges over lunch, missed his company on my walk, missed his strong arms to lean on when I had been dismissed so quickly by my father.

But I should not have done.

And he did not need to know that I had.

As he drifted into a seemingly restful sleep, one arm around me, I lay awake, wondering what I should do. I needed to remind myself of all the reasons it was dangerous to let him get close; why falling in love was a very bad idea. Because here, in his arms, in bed with him, it was very easy to think that falling in love with Christopher Danley, my charming, handsome husband was the best idea in the world.

I tried to recall the image of Queen Katherine's face as she realised her husband was staying at another palace with Anne Boleyn. That hurt, that agony - that was why love was never worth it.



I made it through three days of only seeing him for breakfast and dinner, hurriedly thinking of reasons to be out without him. I visited with the Queen, and sat and read for her - but what was once interesting felt tedious, and I did not go back for a second day. I walked, and purchased fabric for a new dress for the dance, and visited the local poor, giving alms. And every day he would look at me like I had hurt him, and every night after we fell back into the pillows, catching our breath, he told me he missed me.

And I held back the words that he wanted to hear, and fell into a fitful sleep, where guilt warred with fear in my mind.

But then came the request - a joint request, delivered by a well-dressed young page - for us to join the King and Queen as they

travelled through London to celebrate Easter. There was to be a trip on a barge, and on horseback, with Mass said at Westminster Abbey. It was, of course, a tremendous privilege to be invited, along with some of the foremost lords and ladies of the land - but it was a day in which I could not escape Kit's company.

"I have a question, if I may," he said, as we broke our fast and I helped him to dress. He had been on some shorter walks, and felt much better in himself - but putting on a shirt or doublet was still difficult with his injury.

"Of course," I said, nerves dancing in my stomach.

"You told me you swore never to fall in love."

"That's not a question."

He took a bit of his fruit, and the words hung in the air for several painful moments. "Why did you decide that?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Purely interest in my wife," he said, continuing to eat, and although I was sure it was not a good idea, I was compelled to tell him the truth.

"I have seen too much hurt and pain come from falling in love," I said, fiddling with the lace on my sleeve as I spoke. "My father... the Queen... so much pain."

"It doesn't always have to lead to pain, does it?" he said, and when I looked up there was a warm look in his eyes that I was in danger of losing myself in.

"It always seems to," I replied, knowing my voice was cracking a little. Why did he make me feel this way? "It does not seem worth the pain and the tears."

"I rather think love can be a wonderful thing - when it does not end in heartbreak."

"Was that true for your parents?"

He tipped his head slightly to one side. "Well, no. But I still believe it's possible."

I selected an apple. "Well, I do not." And then I bit into the fruit,

ending this futile conversation.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Christopher

So she was scared of getting hurt; was that why she was distancing herself from me so thoroughly? While our nights were still full of passion - with the hope that we might produce an heir, although that certainly was not my only motive - she was increasingly putting distance between us in the daytime, and I found it bothered me. As much as I had planned to travel more once I had an heir, the idea of leaving her suddenly held little appeal.

Was it love?

I did not think I knew what love felt like; but I did not hold it in total disregard as Alice did. It was a magical notion, that you could feel something so strong for another person that it would eclipse everything else. My father certainly hadn't ever spoken of feeling it for my mother, or seemed to show it to my step-mother, or even me. Perhaps for my young half-brother, although I rarely saw him, since he was away at school.

Who did I love?

I had a sneaking suspicion that the answer to that was Alice - and today we would spend the whole day together, in view of the city and our Monarch.

Today I would try to make her remember that she enjoyed my company - no matter how set against it she was.

We boarded the barge after several other esteemed members of the Court, settling on one side, with the King and Queen in the centre. I had held Alice's hand to help her board, and I found myself keeping hold of it as we sat. For a moment it squirmed in mine, then seemed to relax into the gesture.

"Marriage is treating you well, Lord Danley," the King called over, and I smiled broadly in the spring sunshine.

"It certainly is, Your Grace."

"Treasure it," he said. "And may you be blessed with many children!"

I did not miss the pained look crossing Queen Katherine's face; I doubted anyone aboard the barge did. But I did not let my smile falter. "May God bless us," I agreed. The poor lady had lost so many children, and the whole Court knew of their desperation for a living son. I hoped we would not be so troubled when it came to having children - but if we were, I hoped Alice would not feel the anguish the Queen clearly did. I could not help but think that the King did not help her grief - although of course I would never have shared that out loud.

Other than perhaps with Alice; I found I trusted her, just as I had told her to trust me. Trusted her more than anyone else in my life - and that was something of a revelation.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Alice

The sun shone on us as we made our way down the Thames, and I laughed to see little children running alongside and waving. We waved back, and when I turned I saw the King was doing so too. Good spirits were definitely in the air it seemed, and as the barge moved through this great city, we enjoyed the musicians who serenaded us as well as engaging in conversation with all of those around us.

For a while the King asked Kit about his travels, and I listened half in awe, half in fear as he told tales of daring escapes and near-drownings, exotic dances and breath-taking sights. Somewhere in the back of my mind, thoughts of how long he would be content with England began to surface, but I pushed them away, determined to enjoy this day out. I was forced to spend the day with him - I might as well make the most of the break from my difficult decision to distance myself from him.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said, when the conversation has stilled and we were nearing our destination.

"Of course," he replied, turning a little so we were facing each other. "Although I believe you just did."

I rolled my eyes, and continued anyway. "Do you see your brother, much? You mentioned he was away at school..."

His features became a little tight, but he did not avoid my question.

"Rarely," he answered. "I have been out of the country so much, and when he is not at school, he often visits his mother in the North."

"Do you get on with her?" This was probably a conversation for a more private location, but we had spent so little time together lately, at my own design; when the question popped into my head, I could not resist asking it.

"I don't really know her well enough to say," he answered, leaning back into the padded seat. "She seems a perfectly fine woman."

"And your brother?"

"Francis," he supplied. "He's fifteen, and I have not seen him in well over a year."

"That's a shame." I had often wished for siblings; especially after losing Mother, it seemed as though a sibling might have understood how I was feeling. Father certainly could not - or did not wish to - discuss my emotions with me, and so I kept them all inside and tried to move on with my life. But it wasn't until I had married Kit that I had realised how alone I had felt; how lonely my existence had been until he had appeared in my life.

"I suppose," he said, as the boat came to a halt. He offered me his uninjured arm as we alighted, and I gave it a gentle squeeze. He said nothing, but kept me close, and I felt there was an understanding there. We had both been lonely, at some point or another; we had both been hurt by our fathers' lack of interest in our lives.

I did not want to fall in love with this man, but I could not deny that we were well-suited. And that when I allowed myself to be with him, the world felt a much better place...



At the Queen's request, I joined them after Mass to sit and sew, and I was pleased to have the chance to work on the new gown I was making for the dance. The fabric had been costly, but Kit seemed happy for me to spend money if I wished to, and I knew it was important to dress well when we would be seen by so many important people in society. The fabric was a deep green, and would match sleeves I already owned.

We settled around the Queen, one of the maids playing the lute in the background, and sewed in quiet companionship.

"How is your husband faring?" asked Lucy, a maid who had once slept three beds down from me in the maidens' dorter. "We all saw him injured in the lists."

"He is recovering well," I assured her, moving the needle and thread through the fine fabric, trying to not to picture the wound as it had been on that terrible day. "He will be fit enough to attend the

Easter celebrations tomorrow, I am sure."

Everyone agreed this was wonderful news, apart from Jane, who was glaring daggers at me from across the room.

"How goes plans for your betrothal, Jane?" someone asked her, and she turned her head with an annoyed look on her face.

"I shall not know until my brother has decided whom he wishes me to marry."

"Do you know the gentlemen in the running for the title of husband?" Lucy asked softly, knowing such talk would not be approved of by the Queen. Marriage was a serious business - certainly not something to trivialise.

Before she had a chance to answer, another maid had jumped in; Jane had, unfortunately, made many enemies in her time in the Queen's service.

"I heard Lord Lisle's name being mentioned."

"Lisle? Isn't he - quite old?"

Jane pretended to ignore the comments, but she was closer to the speakers than I was, and I could hear them clearly enough. I continued to sew, not joining the chatter but certainly paying attention to every word.

"And only widowed last month!"

"He has children that need a mother though - I'm sure he's keen to marry quickly."

"I hope your conversation is befitting of your station, ladies." I was glad I had not been part of the conversation when one of the Queen's closest confidantes, Baroness Willoughby de Eresby, glared down at us all in her formidable way and chastised those speaking.

My mind wandered as the gentle music of the lute filled the air and the repetitive task of sewing the hem soothed my soul. I had been lucky, really; I had been married to a man I did not know, and yet he was kind, and handsome, and young. He did not try to control me, and when we fell into bed together it was a place of joy and desire.

Was I being a fool, to push him away?



When I returned to dress for dinner, I found the rooms empty for the first time in days. I was pleased Kit felt well enough to leave - but I could not help but wonder where he had gone, and whether he would return in time to go to dinner together. I found it somewhat daunting, walking into that packed hall, knowing that everyone always watched and gossiped about who was coming and going. Was I interesting enough to gossip about? Possibly, since I was married to the handsome Lord Danley, who had so recently survived a jousting injury from none other than the King...

That was definitely enough to get people talking.

With the help of a maid who had started to be sent regularly to see if we needed any assistance, I dressed in a maroon gown, trimmed with lace and pearls that were so popular at Court.

As I was about to leave, nerves building in my stomach at the thought of dining at Court alone, Kit appeared, a scowl on his face and a tear in his shirt.

"Christopher!" I said with a gasp as he stomped towards the fireplace and removed his boots. "What happened?"

"I attempted to mount a horse," he said through gritted teeth, attempting to unlace his shirt with one hand. "I was not successful."

"Are you hurt?" I asked, gently brushing his good hand away and unlacing the shirt myself, before removing it. There was no blood, which was a positive, but I was not sure I could repair the damage to the shirt without it being obvious. Perhaps one of the Palace seamstresses could - they would certainly be more skilled than I.

"My pride is," he said, shifting his feet in irritation as I found him a clean shirt and doublet to replace the ones he had removed.

"Well that will heal," I said, with a roll of my eyes. "I meant your arm."

"It hurts," he said, his tone shorter with me than it normally was. I tried not to be upset; he was clearly in a bad mood, and there was no reason to believe I was anything other than a convenient person to vent to.

"Did you fall on it?"

He shook his head, sitting down on the bed and leaning against one of the posts. "I slid from the horse and caught my shirt on the buckle of the reins."

"You should not be riding."

He sighed; "No. I feel a fool, and I looked one too."

I knelt at his feet, helping him to put on a fresh pair of boots, and for a moment he looked at me, a confusing look upon his face that I did not understand.

"I am sure you did not look a fool," I murmured, my cheeks burning with the intensity of his gaze.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked suddenly, his hand on my shoulder as I pushed the boot onto his foot.

"Because I'm your wife," I said automatically.

The answer did not seem to be the one he was looking for, but I did not know what else to say. Once the other boot was on he offered me his good arm, and we made our way down to dinner in painful silence.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Christopher

We sat side by side, at a crowded table where the food was already being served. After my frustrating afternoon, I thought I would have built up an appetite, but when I bit into my bread I found I wasn't really that hungry.

Nothing seemed to be going to plan.

At night Alice seemed like the woman I had got to know - although briefly - at Chichester Place. In the day she was distant, and absent... and then she had knelt at my feet and helped me put on my shoes as though I were a King.

I could not understand it, and I understood my own feelings about the situation even less. Added to the fact that I had attempted to mount a horse no less than five times, in front of stable boys who struggled to conceal their amusement, before sliding off and ripping my shirt because my damned arm hurt too much to haul myself onto the saddle - well, it had been a rough day.

"I asked her why she was sewing shirts for the poor," a voice from opposite us at the table said. "And she looked at me as though I had grown two heads."

"Well, it's a common enough pastime is it not?" another gentleman said. It seemed I was not the only one confused at the man's rant.

"Sewing, indeed - and I am more than happy for the governess to sew in the evenings. But with me and three lads, there's enough sewing to be done without sewing for the poor. Not in my home, when I'm paying her for the time."

"So," I said, my bad mood leaving me unable to jump into this conversation. "My Lord..."

"Lisle," he supplied, before taking a large bite of bread.

"Lord Lisle. It is not that you are opposed to women sewing, just them sewing for free for those who have very little?"

"You're trying to make me sound heartless," he said, before he had totally finished chewing his food. "But I'm paying for her time, and she should not be wasting it. The poor have risen up against our King more than once - are you saying you support that?"

"Of course he isn't," Alice said, and I could hear the anger in her voice. "But that is not the same as saying you should not help those who are less fortunate. In my time with Her Majesty the Queen, we spent hours sewing shirts and other clothes for the poor. Are you saying the Queen's household was wrong to do so?"

There was an intake of breath; he could not disagree with her without disparaging the Queen, and however distant the relationship between their Majesties was, that would not be tolerated in Henry's court.

"I am sure the Queen makes excellent decisions about how to spend her time," Lord Lisle said diplomatically, and the matter seemed to be settled - until he opened his mouth again.

"You, my lady, might think about holding your tongue, however."

I could feel Alice beside me practically vibrating with anger, and I rested a hand upon her thigh.

"Lord Lisle," I said, my voice quietly menacing. I was sure everyone who could hear was straining to listen to every word of our exchange - but I did not care. "I would advise you to not speak to my wife like that again."

He laughed. "And what will happen if I do?"

"I have fought off pirates, savages and cannibals, Lord Lisle. I don't think you want to know what will happen if you dare to disrespect my wife again, for calling you out on your frankly appalling views." He was about to retaliate, and so I added, almost as an afterthought: "Or I shall just mention it to the King, next time we joust, or play chess. I'm sure he would be very interested to know of your views... especially of the charity work undertaken by our gracious Queen."

His face was turning redder by the second, his mouth open as if to respond - and then he downed his tankard of beer, shoved the bench

away from the table and stormed from the room.

I turned to Alice, a smile playing on my lips, and saw her mouth was slightly open as she regarded me.

"Are you all right?" I asked her, the noise levels of the room returning to normal as people realised the excitement had passed.

She nodded, her mouth still not closed, and I could not resist pressing a chaste kiss to her lips.

"Do you play chess, Alice?" I asked her, finding my appetite had wholly returned after that exchange.

"I have done," she said, after a sip of wine seemed to restore her voice.

"I feel like you would be very good at hunting down your opponent until you won."

She grinned then, and I looked forward to a day when I could take her back to Chichester Place, and we would play chess in the library.

If I could get her to stop disappearing from dawn until dusk, that was.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Alice

I found my mind returning to that moment throughout the meal - the moment when he had stood up for me. When he had placed his hand upon my thigh to stop me retaliating, I had thought he was ashamed of me; I had thought he meant to let the insult pass, despite the fact that the man was obviously despicable.

But he had not. He had stopped me responding, but had responded in my place in such a calm and cool manner that, from the outside, you would not have known he was angry.

And he had sent Lord Lisle running.

We entered our chambers together, arms entwined, laughing about a joke the King's fool had told as we had enjoyed our wine. Many sat around playing cards or making music, but when he had suggested returning to our chamber I had no desire to argue.

The desire to be distant was gone, at least for tonight.

"You were wonderful, in there," I told him, when the door was closed and it was finally just us two.

He raised his eyebrows, but the grin on his face told me he knew exactly to what I was referring. "When was that?"

I wanted to roll my eyes, but gratitude for what he had done stopped me. "When you stood up to Lord Lisle. No-one..." I paused, realising I was revealing a little more of myself to my husband than I had planned, then pushed on regardless. "No-one has ever defended me. I have been told I talk too much, I argue too much, I have too many opinions. I have been told to mind my tongue, and no-one has ever challenged that." I took a step forward, my desire to be near Kit overwhelming me. "Until you."

I pressed a hand to his chest and he lay his larger hand over mine, keeping me close - but I did not want to run this time.

"You were right," he said. "That vile, nasty man was spreading his vile, nasty ideas - and you beat him with your words. He only lashed out because he didn't like being bested - and you don't deserve to be spoken to like that by anyone."

He kissed me hard on the lips, and I did not have time to melt into it before he was speaking again. "You don't speak too much," he said, and then his lips were at my earlobe. "And I love to hear your opinions."

I was feeling breathless, but I could not help but ask: "Even when I disagree with you?"

His lips were at my other ear now, softly tracing the delicate shell. "Especially when you disagree with me," he said, and I could not hold back. My hands were at his back, pulling him closer, as his lips moved to mine. I clawed at his shirt, probably adding to my pile of mending, needing to feel his bare skin, needing to be as close as I could to this man who would stand up for me in front of the whole court, when I was being hot-headed and opinionated.

"Kit, Kit, Kit," I repeated, chanting his name like a prayer as he worshipped my body with his lips.

I thought I heard a tear as he removed my dress, but I no longer cared. He pulled off my hood, running his hands through my hair as he set it free, and for a moment stood watching me as I lay in the light of the setting sun.

"You are beautiful, he said, pulling off the rest of his clothes with a wince as he knocked his arm.

"Are you-" I began to ask, but then his lips were on mine and I instantly forgot the question.

We moved together in the dance we had perfected in the weeks since we had married, and I let myself give in to the all-encompassing pleasure he brought me. It was too much to kiss now, but I could feel his lips hovering by my throat, his breath warm against my skin as we breathed more and more frantically.

And then, in that last moment, where reality and fantasy seemed to exist together, I heard him murmur words that both thrilled and terrified me.

"Alice, Alice, my love."



We dressed for the dance in separate rooms, with borrowed servants attending to us. I knew I must speak with Kit about hiring our own staff if we were to visit court regularly; it was too difficult to dress in the manner we needed to without a fair amount of help.

As the maid finished lacing up my dress, I could not help but smile as I saw myself in the glass. The beautiful dark green fabric, which I had edged with lace and adorned with intricate patterns of beads and pearls, was a thing of beauty indeed. With my hair braided behind my hood, I felt every inch the lady that I was born to be - and confident that Kit would not be disappointed.

What I had not expected was for my breath to be taken away when he entered the room. He wore a doublet of black and grey, the high collar trimmed with lace, his long black boots practically shining. His hair almost looked like it had been tamed; when I met his eyes there was a wild look there which I was sure was mirrored in my own.

"You look exquisite," he said, reaching forward to take my hand and press his lips to where my wedding band sat. The gesture made me feel hot and flustered, and I struggled to find the words to tell him how delectable he looked.

"I shall be the envy of every woman at Court," I finally said, and a smile adorned his full lips in a most distracting way.

"Because they will all want your dress?" he asked, and I smiled myself, because he must surely know how good he looked, know how women looked at him.

"Because they will all want my husband," I corrected, and he blushed before offering his arm.

"Well I am yours," he said simply, and the words touched somewhere in my heart that I had not realised was in need of reassurance.

"As I am yours," I said, without thought - but it was true. I was his, and he was mine, and I was realising with alarm that I was not just in danger of falling in love with this man:

It had happened.

I could not tell him, not yet; I needed to ponder what this meant,

I needed to accept that my heart had been irrevocably changed by Christopher Danley, and that there was nothing I could do about it now.

But for tonight, I simply allowed myself to acknowledge that I was in love with him, as I tried not to let the thought terrify me.

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps love did not always have to end in disaster...

As we walked down the corridors towards the noisy great hall, Kit said; "It is five weeks ago today that we were married, is it not?"

I considered his words and realised with a jolt that he was right; for five whole weeks I had been Lady Danley, the envy of so many women at Court. I had shared his bed and revelled in its pleasures, I had learnt what he thought and felt and for a moment I had been terrified I had lost him when he had been felled in a joust.

I had fallen in love with him.

"You're right," I said with a smile, as we stepped into the great hall, where everything had been pushed to the side to make room for dancing and entertainers.

"Five wonderful weeks," he whispered into my ear, and I blushed; they had been wonderful.

Chapter Forty

Christopher

"Kit Danley?" a voice said, and I turned to see where the voice had come from.

"Nick!" I said, taking his hand in mine with a broad smile. "It has been too long!"

His dark hair was long as it had always been back when we had been at school together, and a beautiful woman held onto his arm, looking nervous.

"Alice," I said, turning to her. "This is Lord Nicholas Gifford. We were at school together - although don't believe everything he tells you." Nicholas laughed. "My wife, Lady Alice Danley."

Nicholas pressed a kiss to her gloved hand. "I hadn't heard you had married. My heartfelt congratulations. Lady Annelise Gifford," he said, presenting his wife.

"It is lovely to meet you, Lord Danley," she said with a smile.

"Call me Kit," I said with an easy smile. "I did not know you were at Court! Are you living in Exeter still?"

He nodded; "Most of the time, although I persuaded Annelise to accompany me on a brief visit to London. Our son William is upstairs with his nanny."

"Congratulations!" Alice said, and I saw Annelise's eyes relax a little. "How old is he?"

"Eight months," she said with a cautious smile. "I don't like to leave him for too long..."

Nicholas patted her hand and smiled. "We won't be long, darling, I promise."

"We must catch up properly," I said. "A ride, perhaps, if you're

free one day?"

"Should you be riding with your arm?" Alice immediately said, and I realised I had forgotten about the injury completely. I thought it would be safe enough to ride, but then again, I did not wish to revisit the pain I had been in...

"Oh, all right, a walk then," I said with a laugh, turning back to Nicholas to explain. "I had a jousting accident a couple of weeks ago."

"Not the one against the King?" Nicholas asked, and Annelise gasped. "We heard about that the day we arrived!"

"That's the one, I'm afraid, although I'd prefer it wasn't what people knew me for!"

Alice laughed; "Oh, you want to be known for sea adventures and daring escapes from pirates, not being knocked off your horse in a joust?"

I saw Annelise's eyes widen, but I laughed; Alice's sharp tongue was one of the things I loved most about her.

Loved? The casual way my mind tied that word with her made me pause for a moment, before I pushed the thought away for later.

"Oh, definitely," I said, a twinkle in my eye as I took Alice's hand. The music began, and I grinned to Nicholas. "Shall we meet later in the week for a walk, since that is all I am permitted to do?"

He laughed; "That would be marvellous."

We said our goodbyes before I swept Alice into the crowd, attempting to lead her in the dance without using my injured arm too much.

"Are you sure you should be-"

"I want to dance with my wife," I said, as we moved together to the music, neither of us paying much attention to those around us. "And one dance will not be the death of me."

She rolled her eyes but smiled, and it was clear we had both received dance lessons growing up. There was not a single stepped-on toe or missed step, and as the music reached its crescendo, our eyes met, smiles dancing on our faces, the warmth of her body reaching me

even through our intricate clothes. Without thinking, I pressed a kiss to her lips, savouring the moment as I did every moment I spent with her.

Oh, there was no doubting it, I realised as the music ended and we repaired to the side of the room for refreshments. I was most definitely in love with my wife.

But had she not told me, before I had first lain with her, that she would never, ever fall in love with me?

I could only hope I could change her mind.

Chapter Forty-One

Alice

He didn't leave my side all night, despite the fact that I was sure his arm was hurting him. We danced three times, and each time I felt the thrill of having his body pressed close to mine, of seeing him glide through the steps without a thought, of knowing that the whole court saw us together. He asked no-one else to dance, and I declined all other invitations - until one came I could not turn down.

"Danley! It is good to see you well enough to dance," the King said, as the crowd parted for him. We made our bows, and as I returned to standing I saw the Lady Anne nearby, watching us carefully.

"I am much recovered," Kit said. "Although I think three dances is as much as my arm can take!"

"You'll be back in the saddle again in no time," King Henry said, clapping Kit on the back and not seeming to notice his wince. "For now, however - Lady Danley, would you do me the honour of dancing with me?"

"I would be delighted," I replied instantly, a reply so automatic my shock at being asked had not registered on my face before the words left my lips. He held out his arm and I took it, glancing briefly at Kit with an apology ready on my lips that of course I could not say.

Walking through the crowded palace on the King's arm was a terrifying experience. Every eye felt like it was on me, every tongue saying my name, or asking who I was. I was not known, I was not a court favourite, even if my husband was liked by the King.

And yet now I was to dance with him, in front of everyone.

In front of the Queen.

In front of Lady Anne Boleyn.

It was a good thing that I knew the steps to the pavane by heart,

as my mind was not focussed on them. The King performed each step perfectly, his purple outfit making him seem like the brightest jewel in the room. For a moment I saw him as I imagined so many others did - powerful, majestic, breathtaking to behold - and then I caught sight of Kit in the corner of my eye and realised that no other man could hold a candle to him. Not for me. My heart was lost, in a way I had always promised it would not be.

"You look deep in thought, my lady," the King said as the dance brought us closer.

"I am overwhelmed," I admitted, knowing it was in part the truth. "You do me a great honour."

"You are a beautiful woman," he replied. "The honour is mine."

I smiled, even though the compliment made me feel a little queasy.

"I hope you and Lord Danley stay at court regularly - even when you start a family. He is a fine competitor to join our sports, and you are a beautiful gem amongst the women at court."

Another compliment, and I felt even more sick - but I pretended to be flattered by his words, as the dance finally came to an end and I could dip a deep curtsy, and watch him return to his lover.

It was only as I returned to Kit's side, and murmured my apologies for abandoning him, that the King's words struck a chord with me. Not his compliments - those I was already trying to forget.

It was the idea of starting a family.

Five glorious weeks we had been wed - we had acknowledged it only hours earlier. Five glorious weeks, with no interruptions to our delights in the bedchamber.

From what I had been told, that was a sign - and my heart stumbled in my chest as I realised that there was a good chance I was already carrying Kit's child. As I looked at his profile, strong and handsome, watching the King's jester as he made his way through the crowd, I realised this revelation did not scare me as much as I might have imagined.

I was in love with Kit Danley.

I was possibly carrying his child.

And even though we were surrounded by the majesty of the court, the opulence of the clothes and the richness of the food, I could picture as clear as day the grounds of Chichester Place, with our children running around, giggling as Kit threw them in the air or chased after them. I could see a life I had considered before, but it was no longer abstract. A life in the country, as a wife - as a mother.

He looked down at me and smiled, and my heart sped up in my chest.

"Do you wish to stay longer?" he asked, and I shook my head, finally admitting to myself that the place I wanted to be was with him, away from all the pretense the court was filled with.

Chapter Forty-Two

Christopher

I had watched her dance with the King and felt that same pool of jealousy in the pit of my stomach. But I also trusted her, and when she returned to me with an apology on her lips and a smile that was only for me, I forgot about the dance and thought only of returning to our room.

The words were dancing on my tongue as we walked up to our chamber, and I could not get them out of my head as we undressed, or as we made love on that grand bed, whispering terms of endearment in each other's ears.

I love you.

But I did not say it. How could I, when we had agreed this was not to be a marriage of love? When she had sworn to me she would not fall in love with me?

And so I kept the words in my mind alone, even though they were desperate to escape, and tried to show her how much I cared in other ways.

Chapter Forty-Three

Alice

"Christopher!"

We were taking a walk through the gardens together, making the most of the beautiful weather, when we heard his name shouted across the grounds. I stopped, turning to see where it came from, but I did not miss the flash of irritation across his face - and when I saw who was calling, I realised why.

We stopped - we had no choice, really - and waited for Kit's father, the Earl of Kent, to catch up with us.

"Father," Kit said tersely, and I bowed my head to the Earl.

"Your Excellency." It seemed strangely formal, but I had only met this man once before, on our wedding day - and he was as much of a stranger as most of the other Earls at court were to me.

"Lady Danley," he said. "It is good to see you again." He turned to Kit; "I heard you were injured in a joust."

"Not fatally, I'm afraid," he said, and even after our discussions of our fathers, I was shocked at the antagonistic tone he took.

"What a ridiculous thing to say Christopher. I am pleased you are recovering well. It seems the King holds you in high favour."

Kit nodded, but said nothing more.

"Your brother will be at Court for the next few weeks," the Earl said. "He hopes to serve in the King's household once he has finished his schooling."

"Indeed."

"He would like to see you. He arrives tomorrow; will you and your wife come and dine with us?"

For a moment I thought he would refuse, and I gently squeezed

his arm. I would not disagree with him in front of his father, but this felt like an olive branch - and surely it would be good for us to spend some time with his father and brother before we returned to the countryside.

"Very well."

I breathed a sigh of relief, my hand moving almost subconsciously to my stomach. My courses had still not arrived, and as the hours ticked by I became more and more convinced that I was with child. I had hoped the walk would help me stop my mind from swirling and make some decisions about what to tell Kit, and when. That I was with child? I would obviously tell him that, although the when was in question.

That I was in love with him? I was not sure if I ever wanted to admit that - although I had been so close to saying it last night, when we were alone in our room together, bathed in candlelight, whispering to one another in the semi-darkness.

But the arrival of his father had simply thrown more worries out there for my mind to deal with, and so those issues were pushed to the back. Now I had dinner with a father-in-law and brother-in-law that I did not really know to prepare for, on top of everything else.

Chapter Forty-Four

Christopher

Why had I agreed to it? I did not want to spend time with my father, or Francis either if truth be told. Was it the soft pressure of Alice's hand on my arm, making me think that a relationship with my family was perhaps not such a bad idea? Was it the knowledge that she was choosing to bite her tongue, so as not to speak against me in front of my father?

Whatever it was, I had agreed, and so the next evening we dressed in our finery and walked the short distance to my father's London home. I did not speak on the way over, but Alice seemed to understand; she held my hand, and walked silently too, other than when she greeted people she knew who were out enjoying the fine weather.

As I went to knock on the door, she took my hand and gave me a beautiful smile that made my emotions feel like they might overwhelm me.

"A few hours," she said. "And then it can be just us."

I nodded, and I kept that thought in my mind: at the end of this night, we could be just the two of us again, and I might not have to see my father for many months to come.

We were shown to the great hall, where Father and Francis were already sat.

"Kit!" Francis said, rising from his chair and striding over to shake my hand. He had grown tall in the year since I had seen him, and had a smattering of fair hair across his chin, in an attempt to grow a beard.

"Francis." I was guarded around any member of my family, but his enthusiasm to see me thawed my iciness a little.

"It has been too long, brother."

"Indeed. May I present my wife, Lady Alice Danley."

He took Alice's hand and pressed a kiss to it. "Delighted to meet you. I am sorry I missed your nuptials."

"There was not enough time for guests to travel," Father said, rising. "Christopher, Alice, thank you for coming."

We took our seats, and I was pleased when wine was poured almost immediately.

"And how is married life treating you?" Father asked Alice; it seemed he had been drinking wine for a while before we had arrived, for his eyes looked a little out of focus and his words not as clear as usual. It surprised me a little; he was not one to normally lose control.

"Very well, thank you," Alice said, and I felt my heart warm at the words. They were true; marriage was so much better than I could have ever imagined.

Chapter Forty-Five

Alice

My eyes darted towards Kit, and I could see the tension in his shoulders; I wished I could say something to make this experience less uncomfortable for him, but I knew I could not. I would simply have to be here for him, with him, until we could leave and continue our lives away from our fathers.

"See? I told you marriage would not be so bad."

The comment was aimed at Kit, who gripped his goblet tighter and did not respond. My eyebrows raised at that; had he been so set against marriage?

As the food was served and silence reigned, I pondered that. I supposed I was not completely enamored with the idea of marriage, before I had said my vows - especially not when I had realised the man I was to marry was one who had irritated me so much on our first meeting. But now, my heart had most certainly changed - and so I supposed I could not hold it against him if he had felt different in the beginning.

"How are your studies going?" Kit asked Francis, as food was placed on the table before us.

"Well, thank you," Francis said. "I have recently joined lessons in Greek, as well as Latin."

"A skill with languages must run in the family," I said with a smile.

"I studied many languages at school, so perhaps it does," the Earl said, taking another sip of his wine before starting his food.

"Well, it must have been useful for you, Kit, with all your travelling," Francis said. "Will you be off again soon?"

My stomach tightened at the thought; would he want to leave? It had always worried me, at the back of my mind, but lately I had

pushed it away...

"Not soon," he said, and I let myself relax a little. "I am only recently married, after all." A smile played on his lips, and I could not help but mirror it.

"See?" the Earl said, sloshing wine onto the table on the way to his mouth. "It was a good thing I forced you into marriage. Sounds like it has all worked out for the best."

My heart clenched and I felt as though I had stepped into a freezing lake.

Forced?

The room was silent, save for the Earl's spoon scraping against his bowl.

And then he continued to pour salt into the wound that was rapidly growing in my heart.

"I'm glad you chose to turn up. Now all we need is an heir, and you will have done your duty. And you can travel the world once more..."

I decided then that I did not have to listen to this. I had always known love would lead to pain and heartbreak, but never had I imagined this. If someone had stabbed a knife into my heart and left it there I did not think it could be more painful than this. I could not look at Kit, even when I heard him say my name, and I pushed the chair out with as much force as I could muster.

"Excuse me," I muttered, dashing from the room, out into the hallway and onto the London streets. Would Kit be behind me? I wondered what was more important - trying to defend his actions to me, or attacking his father for his words. I hurried into a side alley in case, and let the tears that were burning in my eyes fall.

I had known this marriage was arranged by our fathers; I had known that he had not been aware of who I was when we had met in the Queen's chambers. But if what his father had said was true - and I had not heard any words to deny it - then it seemed he had not come to the marriage of his own free will. His hand had been forced - and I could not help but wonder how he had been persuaded, and whether he'd needed even more persuasion once he found out it was me who he was going to have to marry.

Why did this hurt so much? I leaned against the brick wall to stop myself collapsing to the floor, and let my head fall back against the cold, unforgiving stone. I was in love with him; it had been so recently that I had realised that, had accepted that - and now I realised it was all a farce. He had only married me because his father had made him do so - and in our many, many nights wrapped up together in bed, he had never thought to mention it to me.

That hurt too.

I had wanted marriage; I had accepted him as my husband. No-one had forced me, or tricked me, or bribed me. I had come as willingly as a person could be when they barely knew their intended - and yet he had not wanted to marry me at all.

"Alice?"

The voice was tentative, and certainly not Kit's, and I realised in a sudden flash of clarity that it was not safe for me to be alone, in the dark, on the streets of London.

My heart pounding in my ears, I rubbed my hands across my eyes quickly and turned to face the voice, ready to run if I needed to...

But I was relieved to see it was only Francis.

Chapter Forty-Six

Christopher

"Did I say something amiss?" Father was saying, swigging more of the god-forsaken wine, and I was torn between wanting to shout at him and wanting to run out and find Alice.

"You told the woman I'm married to that I did not want to marry her! That I was forced!" I said, noticing Francis slip from the room as I chose to shout before I raced after Alice. "Do you not think that might be something to keep to yourself?"

"But you didn't want to marry her," he said, but it looked like he was perhaps realising what an idiotic thing he'd said.

Not that he would ever admit it.

"No - but things are different now. I'm different, she's different, I-" I nearly told him that I was in love with my wife, but I could not. I could not bare my soul like that to him; and I could not tell him before I'd had a chance to tell her. Surely, now more than ever, she needed to know that.

Because I did. I had no desire to travel because I just wanted to be with her. I did not care about the money, save for having enough to keep her happy and comfortable.

But she didn't know that.

I left my father mid-sentence, and tore out into the street, looking left and right in the darkness for Alice. It was only then I realised what an idiot I had been to not follow her immediately when she excused herself from that disaster of a meal - it was dark, and she had been upset. And now, she was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Alice

Francis offered me his arm, and I took it, coming out of the shadows into the dim light of the moon.

"I could walk you back to the palace, if you like," he said.

"Thank you." He seemed sweet enough, and he was the only option I had other than walking alone, which did not seem like a sensible choice.

"I am so sorry, about my father," he said. "We had been drinking earlier in the day, and I think he had over-imbibed."

"That does not mean what he said was false," I said, and as much as I wished he would, he did not deny it.

"No, but he should not have said it so bluntly. When he threatened to cut off Kit if he did not marry, I believe he only meant to encourage him to settle down."

I choked back a sob, although I did not think Francis noticed, as he continued to talk. It was money? That was what had forced him to marry me - money? Disgust made the food in my stomach churn furiously.

"And he had been with so many women, but never chosen to marry..."

Dear God, he was still talking. Had he not learned when it was best to be quiet at that school of his? I did not want to hear him at all, let alone tales of Christopher's exploits before we had married.

"Thank you for walking me home," I said, as we reached the gates of the palace where I knew I would be safe. I had to cut him off mid-sentence, but I needed to be rid of him and spend some time alone with this pain I felt.

"Oh. You are welcome." He swept me an over-officious bow,

proclaimed he was my servant, and disappeared into the night.

I went to our room: what choice did I have? Even though I knew Kit would eventually reappear, there was nowhere else for me to go. My father's rooms? I could almost have laughed at the thought, if I did not want to burst into tears so badly.

I had no-one but Kit, and he had wounded me in the way I had always suspected he might. What a fool I had been.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Christopher

By the time I reached our rooms, holding on to a shred of hope that she might be there, I was in a state of panic. She had been nowhere on the walk home, but some unsavoury types were loitering near the local inn, and I did not like the thought of her walking back on her own.

When I opened the door and saw her sat in a chair, a book on her lap unopened, my first feeling was relief.

"There you are! I was worried."

"I am here."

"Alice." What could I say? How could I make her believe that I cared, that I was sorry, that none of my father's words were true any longer.

I knelt at her feet, taking her cold hands in mine, hoping she could see the depth of emotion in my eyes as they met hers. "Alice, I am so sorry."

"That your father spoke the truth?" Her words were cold, and there was no emotion in her eyes. Despite the roaring fire, I felt a shiver go down my spine.

"He did not - that is not - when I-"

"Oh Christopher," she said, derision in her tone that I had not heard before. "If it is so difficult to find an explanation, perhaps there is not one. You were forced to marry me."

Was the truth my only option? It painted me in such a poor light, but anything else would surely do her a disservice. "I was forced to marry," I admitted.

"For money."

Where had she heard that? I did not remember Father spilling

that particular detail at the dinner table.

"So I would not be cut off from money. But I did not know it was you I was to marry."

"Until when?"

That made me pause; we had discussed her knowledge of my identity, but never when I had found out I would be marrying her.

"When I saw you in the church," I said, my head bowed in shame. "But it's not-"

"I thought you had more of a backbone than that," she said, and my eyes widened in shock. "To agree to marry a woman you had never even met, with no knowledge of what she was like, or her age, or whether you would suit - for money? I am disappointed in you."

Her words cut me more painfully than Henry's lance had during the jousting, and I rose to my feet a little unsteadily.

"You married me for my title and money, Alice, let's not pretend otherwise. This was a business contract for us both - for us to produce a Danley heir." Why was I saying these words? They were so far from the words threatening to burst from me with every beat of my heart - *I love you, I'm sorry, don't leave me, I love you* - and yet I could not let her words go unchallenged.

She rose, putting the book on the mantelpiece, and for a moment I thought she would not respond.

When she turned back, I thought I had never seen such a hollow look; and then her voice began, soft and deadly and lacking in any emotion. "You are right, of course. A business contract. But you forget - I did know who you were before we wed. And I never hid my expectations of this marriage from you."

She moved to the door, leading to an adjoining bedchamber we had not used, and pushed it open. "Good night, my lord."

And then she was gone, and I sank into the resplendent red bed, head in my hands, wondering how everything had gone so terribly wrong in one evening.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Alice

I sank into a fitful sleep sometime in the early hours of the morning. I had wondered if Kit would come through the door and apologise again, or have some explanation - but he had not.

What explanation was there?

Our marriage was not what I had thought it was - and it was everything I had planned it to be. That was why this hurt so much; I had let him into my heart, but I had been wrong. He did not love me; he had been forced into a marriage with me so he could keep his inheritance. He would have married any girl who had turned up in that church - the fact that it was me meant nothing at all.

When I awoke, the room was quiet and I had to remember why I was alone in this large, cold bed. I wrapped my arms around myself, the knowledge that life grew inside me somehow making this situation so much worse. I could not tell him now; not when thinking about him made me feel such anguish that I did not want to even look at him.

When a maid arrived to help me dress I did so, not asking if she had seen my husband next door. When I finally found the courage to go through the adjoining room in order to reach the corridor outside, I found the room we had shared completely empty - and instantly my mind became obsessed with where he was, and who he was with.

I wandered the halls aimlessly, not able to contemplate sitting down to eat with the other Lords and Ladies at court. I considered visiting my father, but immediately dismissed the thought; he would tell me to do my duty by my husband, I was sure, with no sympathy to my plight. If he had anything to say to me at all...

"The Queen!" I stood to the side as she was announced, curtsying along with the others in the narrow hallway.

"Lady Danley," she said, and I raised my eyes to look at her as she stopped in the hallway to speak to me.

"Your Majesty," I said, and for a moment she just looked at me.

"Will you join me for Mass, Lady Danley?" she asked.

"Of- Of course." I could not have refused, even if I had wanted to - but I found the quiet chapel somewhat comforting, and it was kind of the Queen to ask me to accompany them. The ladies in her wake left space for me to join them at the front, and when we reached her private chapel, she gestured for me to kneel beside her.

For a long while we prayed in silence, before the priest entered and held Mass. I tried to keep my thoughts on the words he said, instead of letting them wander back to Kit and what he might be doing - but I was not always successful. The incense and candles had a soporific effect, and I at least felt my body calm as I knelt in this holy place with the most powerful woman of the land.

Once the service had finished, I remained bowed for some time, trying to work out how to communicate with a God I had never felt much of a connection with. And as for what I was praying for... the problem was, I did not know. Did I want my husband to love me? Or did I just want this pain to end?

When I opened my eyes, the Queen was watching me - and I was surprised to find we were alone.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," I said, gathering my skirts and getting to my feet. "I did not wish to waylay you."

"Do not apologise, my child," she said, rising too and sitting on the wooden pew, with a motion to suggest I join her. "You seem troubled."

"I-" This was the Queen of England before me, and she had noticed the turmoil I was in - and yet I did not know how to speak of it. My eyes met hers, and I saw the sadness there that had haunted me for so long, the sadness of a woman whose husband had betrayed her love.

Did she see it mirrored in my eyes? For although I had not suffered the years she had, this wound was fresh and I knew of no way to hide my pain.

"I will offer you help, if I can, Lady Danley," she said, with a soft smile. "You have always been a kind and devoted woman, and I do not like to see you hurting."

"I do not believe my husband loves me," I said, then pressed my hand to my mouth, shocked I had let the words escape. But there were more, and they needed to be said - "I believe he was forced to marry me, and now I do not know what to do."

For a moment she was silent, and I wondered if I had overstepped, sharing my concerns with her. But when she spoke, her voice was full of emotion - and I found myself forgetting with whom it was that I spoke. "It is a wife's greatest burden," she said. "To be dutiful, and loving, no matter how her husband might feel or show his affections." The words caught as they left her lips, and I thought of how freely Henry showed his affections - to other women.

Would Kit lie with another woman at Court? The idea made my insides twist, and I tried to push it away, but Francis's words haunted me - *he had been with so many women.*

I was no fool; I knew men were not held to the same standards as women were, knew that he would have lain with other women before we said our vows. But the idea of him continuing to do so after that sacred promise - of having to put up with gossip of him with other women, when I loved him, when despite all of this I was in love with him - that was enough to fill my eyes with tears and my heart with despair.

"God willing," the Queen said, "You will have children. And they will become your whole world, and make it easier for you to be a dutiful wife. But Lady Danley-" She paused, and I cautiously met her eyes, knowing mine were swimming with unshed tears. "I do believe Lord Danley holds you in high regard. He seems a good man - and I hope you can find happiness together."

I curtsied low as she stood. "Thank you. Your Majesty..."

"May God bless you, my dear," she said, placing a hand atop my head, and then she was gone, and I fell to my knees before the altar once more, praying for my husband to at least remain faithful to me.

Chapter Fifty

Christopher

My boots clicked loudly along the stone floors, as I made my way to the King's rooms after a summons had come that very morning. I had woken full of regrets at how I had spoken to Alice - and wondering how I could return things to the way they had been before my father had opened his stupid mouth.

But whatever troubles I was having with my wife, I could not ignore a direct summons from the King.

I was announced and entered the room to the King sat in a high-backed chair behind a wooden desk, an intricate plan laid before him. I bowed, my mind racing; why had the King asked me here? It did not look like a situation for entertainment, and so far I had only spent time with the King when he was in the mood for fun and games.

"Danley," he said, pointing to a wooden chair before him. "Sit. Do you want some wine?"

"Thank you." A page brought it over, and I leaned back into the wood and waited for the King to speak again.

"I need your advice," he said. "You are a well-travelled man, and I believe you have made this journey before."

He traced a path on the map with his finger, and I nodded. "Several times, Your Grace."

"Good. We need to know where we might be set upon, if the French do not keep to their word when we visit later this month."

Ah. Politics - something I had always tried to steer clear of - was rearing its ugly head. But this was my King asking, and so of course it could not be avoided. I studied the map, and let my mind wander back to the journey I had made countless times, with the wind rushing at my face and the sea spray at my back, and made sure I thought of every possible point someone could mount an attack upon a visiting fleet.



When I arrived back to our rooms, I was surprised to find Alice there, sat eating a meal at the little table. We had spent so many days apart since we had been here, but today I found I had missed her even more. Knowing the rift that was between us made me long to soothe her - and yet I was not sure how to go about fixing the damage our words had caused.

"Good evening," I said, noticing her eyes were red and her face a little blotchy.

"Good evening," she responded, barely looking my direction. I took a seat across from her and helped myself to a slice of bread.

"We should talk," I said.

"We spoke last night," she said. "I have said everything I have to say."

"Alice..." I sighed, and pressed my eyes shut for a moment, wishing I could find these words easier. "We are still married," I finally said. "You are my wife..."

"I am. And I shall do my duty to you as your wife. But I am reminded that our marriage is purely for the advancement of our families, and so I shall attend to my own affairs during the day."

"I-" I was speechless. Could we really return to some cold, detached version of marriage where sex was had for procreation, but no emotions were felt?

I did not think so.

And perhaps that was the best way to make her realise the depth of my feelings far surpassed what my father had said.

I waited until we had eaten the meal, almost entirely in silence, and then finished my wine.

"Shall we go to bed then, wife?"

Chapter Fifty-One

Alice

I could have said no - I knew that. I could have told him I was sure I was pregnant, that there was no need for us to continue to try to make an heir because I believed I was carrying one.

But I did not.

I tried not to ask myself why, as I let him unlace my dress, because I knew the answer; I wanted to be with him, to be close to him, and no matter how hurt I was, I did not want to lose this part of him that I had. I did not want to love him, and he did not want to love me, but the idea of not being with him at all was too painful to contemplate.

I gave myself up to his kisses as we moved to the bed, trying to not read anything into how passionate he was. Our bodies had always seemed well-suited - and now was no different.

"Alice..." he whispered, and I imagined for a moment that it was a word of love, as I pulled his shirt over his head and threw it to the floor with the rest of our clothes.

We moved together as though we had all the time in the world to indulge our passions, and in a way I supposed we did; but part of me felt like all this had a time limit hanging over it. Once he knew I was pregnant, there would be no reason for us to lie together. Once I had a child - a son, perhaps - would there be any reason for him to be in this country?

He had not married me for love; his love was the sea, and for a brief moment I had convinced myself that he would not be lured back there.

Now I was sure he would be - and so our time together, in whatever capacity, was surely finite.

And so I held him close as we both chased ecstasy, feeling as though my whole world was on the edge of a cliff, just moment's away

from plunging into the abyss...



I ran to the water closet when an overwhelming nausea overcame me, and thankfully made it before I emptied the contents of my stomach. If there had been any doubt about my condition, this surely confirmed it, and I stood for a moment to make sure I was not going to be hit with another wave.

When I returned to the bedchamber, I realised that Kit had gone. Had he been there when I awoke? The need to be sick had been so urgent that I had not noticed, but I thought not.

Where had he gone so early? And without a word?

I sighed, and rested a hand on my stomach. Things had become so much more complicated since I had married, and yet the fruit of our labours was growing inside me, a child I could love and nurture and who might one day inherit an earldom.

Despite my sickness, I found I was still hungry, and was relieved when a maid brought in a tray of food.

I ate alone and in silence, watching people coming and going through the window. When I spotted Kit striding across the courtyard towards the stables, I sat up straight, and felt my heart thunder in my chest as he stopped to speak with a woman I did not recognise. It was hard to see from a distance, but it seemed she was smiling, and when he pressed his lips to her gloved hand before departing, I questioned why I had lain with him the night before.

I did not know this man, not truly; I did not know if he would seek out other women, believing I held no feelings for him as I had promised I would not.

I could not switch off the emotions swirling inside me, but I could put distance between us - proper distance this time.

Pushing away my plate, my appetite suddenly gone, I made a decision - a decision I hoped would save my withering heart.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Christopher

I reached the stables later than I'd hoped, having been waylaid by my stepmother. It was very rare she came to Court, and I presumed she had not wanted to miss a chance to see her son while he was away from school. She doted on him, and I thought it sad he did not visit her, instead of our cold Father - but I supposed being at Court suited his future prospects better than visiting his mother in the Northern countryside.

It had been before dawn when I had sneaked out, Alice still lying peacefully asleep next to me. I'd felt closer to her last night than I had since my Father had spoken of our wedding, and it had pained me to leave her - but a directive from the King had been slipped under our door the night before, and it could not be ignored.

The meeting with him had been much the same as before, pointing out any danger that could befall a fleet on a plotted journey. Only this time it had been met with an instruction - to meet a merchant at the docks, who would have a letter for the King from his supporters in France. It was an honour to be trusted with such a task, of course - but as I rode for the docks alone, I almost wished I had been left out of the King's plans. My thirst for adventure, it seemed, had been dampened - and I was left longing for the comforts of home.

Longing for Alice.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Alice

He arrived back late, and I was ready, pacing the bedchamber that I had not left all day. He was dusty and his hair was damp, and for a moment I wanted to ask him where he had been, and how his day had been - before I remembered my plan.

I needed to protect myself from more heartbreak - and this was the only way.

It would have to start with the truth; but then I was willing to lie about my feelings until I could escape the torture of watching my husband fall into bed with courtiers.

"Christopher."

He sighed at my tone, and flopped in a chair, looking weary.

"I haven't the energy for a fight, Alice," he said, and again I had to stop myself from asking why, from trying to make him feel better.

"I don't wish to fight," I said, truthfully. "I have news." I swallowed, nervous to spill the words I had been practising all afternoon. "I believe I am with child."

For a moment silence reigned, and then he stood and took my hands, a smile creeping across his face.

"Alice, that is wonderful. How do you feel?"

The question threw me off, and for a moment my prepared speech was halted. "Sick, but well other than that."

"You must rest," he said.

"I wish to return to Chichester Place," I said and I could see him nodding in agreement, see the ideas blossoming in his mind, and I had to stop him before he got any further - "You are welcome to stay here."

The light in his eyes dimmed, and the hurt look he could not hide

was almost as painful as finding out he had been forced to marry me.

"Alice, I-

"You are busy here. I need to rest, and the countryside will be the best place for that. You can return closer to when the babe is born, if you wish."

Chapter Fifty-Four

Christopher

If I wished? What was she doing to me? Acting as though I would not want to see my newborn child - as though I did not want to take care of her until her confinement, to support her in this next step of our lives.

But she wished me to remain here - and that hurt more than anything she had ever said. I did not understand her reasoning, but I had no argument to put forward; if she wanted to return to Chichester Place alone, I supposed it was only right I let her.

I had always imagined a marriage, in the abstract, to be full of love. What I had never imagined was loving another person who was so wholly against being in love with me, that she pushed me away at every opportunity. I knew I had hurt her, and I was not happy that I had - but before I could agree to her wishes, I realised I was not willing to have that distance between us.

"We should go together," I insisted. "We can make sure the house is prepared for a babe, and that you rest."

I took her hand once more, needing to feel close to her as we talked about this life we had created together. "You are my wife, Alice. I do not wish to be apart from you." *I love you.* I so nearly said it, but pride stopped me; she did not want me. She did not love me. I could not allow myself to admit it to her, just to be thoroughly rejected.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Alice

What could I say to that, except give my agreement? I could not stop him accompanying me home, and I knew that a traitorous part of me wanted him to come with me. Hope buoyed in my chest: if he wanted to be with me, perhaps he was not considering other women at Court.

"When can we leave?"

"I will have to ask the King's permission - but by the end of the week, I imagine."

"Good." I was so ready to leave the Court, with all its drama and intrigue, and closet myself away at Chichester Place. Of course, I was a good way off my confinement, and I could only hope and pray that the pregnancy progressed that far - but the stress of Court would surely not help that.

For a moment we stood, our hands clasped together, so many unsaid words surrounding us - and then I could not help but try one last time.

"We have done our duty, Christopher. If you wanted to stay at court..."

It hurt me to even say the words, but I knew it would be even more painful to sit at Chichester Place in love with him, wondering where he had gone or when he would be coming home.

He let go of my hands and walked towards the window, and I found myself holding my breath as I waited for his response.

"Why do you keep trying to separate us, Alice?" he asked suddenly, with a sigh of frustration. "Am I such a terrible husband? Have I mistreated you?"

"You didn't even want to be married to me!" I burst out, smarting at how unfair it was of him to blame me for this. "You were forced

into it!"

I could hear him gritting his teeth as he wheeled round to face me. "I was told I had to marry. I still chose to marry *you*."

I threw my hands up in the air; "What does that even mean, Kit? You didn't even know who you were being made to marry!"

"Which is why I never planned to go through with it!" His words hung in the air, and he almost looked as though he wanted to take them back again, his eyes wide and brows raised - but he could not.

Taking a deep breath, my eyes met his; "What?"

"I-" He let out a huff and threw himself into a chair by the fireplace. "I never planned to go through with the wedding my father told me I had to take part in. I did not want to force a woman into a marriage she did not want."

I sat down too, feeling the anger and energy leaving me rapidly, a fog of exhaustion remaining in their place. "You asked me if I was happy to go through with the wedding."

He nodded, but said nothing, and I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling the warmth of the spring sunshine on my eyelids as it seeped through the windows.

"Why did you go through with it?" I asked, my eyes still closed, unwilling to face him right now. "When you turned up at the chapel?"

When the silence dragged on too long, I had to open my eyes, and I saw he was fiddling with the tablecloth and seemingly trying to find words.

"Kit?"

He swallowed, and then his eyes met mine, and my heart fluttered at how vulnerable he looked.

"I had been thinking about you - since we met. And when I saw it was you - and you were willing to marry me - I thought it seemed like a good plan. Like fate had intervened..." He blushed.

"My arguing with you made you decide to marry me?"

He laughed; "It's very dull to always be agreed with."

And I laughed too, feeling lighter than I had in days.

"Alice," he said, my name tripping off his lips like a song. "I know we are no love match. I know you are sworn against love." My mind was valiantly arguing against that very statement, but my lips remained guardians of those dangerous words, refusing to let them escape. "But we can get along together, can we not? We can live in the same house, and raise a child to feel as though it is wanted?" The unspoken 'unlike us' was there, and the image of the two of us playing with our child together lit up my mind. I wanted that - more than I wanted anything, I wanted our child to feel loved and wanted.

And I was willing to be in love with Kit silently and secretly to achieve that.

"Yes," I said, with a nod. "Yes, I think we can."



We travelled back in a borrowed carriage, Kit unwilling for me to travel by horseback in my condition. The King was not pleased that we were leaving Court, but when Kit agreed we would return as soon as we could, he allowed us to depart. And he had loaned us a carriage, so we could not have lost his good favour entirely.

As we re-entered Chichester Place, I had a sudden rushing feeling of homeliness that I did not think I had ever experienced before. I glanced over at Kit, and there was a smile on his face, too; I wondered if he felt the same.

Had we built a home here, without even realising it? How I would love for this child to be raised in one house. I knew there would be discussions down the road about schooling, and whether the child should become a ward of someone powerful and influential - but for now, I just wanted to hold on to the idea of our child being born here, and living and growing here, and knowing the love of two parents.

"You should rest," Kit said, his eyes warm as he looked at me with an expression I could not quite read. He had been nothing but solicitous on the journey home, even at the horrible moment when we had to stop the carriage so I could be sick at the side of the road. "I can have some food brought up to you, if you like?"

I smiled; "Thank you."

A maid to help me dress and undress had been hired in our absence, and it was a relief to have someone help me put on a simple day dress, removing the weight of my formal clothes and hood. She ran a brush through my hair and I closed my eyes at the feeling, tiredness washing over me.

I thanked her as she left and slipped beneath the blankets of the bed. It was only then that I realised I had retired to the wrong room - to Kit's room. When we had stayed here before, we had slept here together - and now, with everything that had come out, and with me already pregnant, I supposed we would return to separate bed chambers.

I knew it was something I should have thought of, but the idea of it made my weary eyes want to cry.

As I was talking myself into getting up and moving to the room next door, there was a knock, and Kit walked in with a tray of food and a jug of wine.

"I- I didn't think about which bed I should be in," I blurted out, before blushing, feeling like a fool.

He brushed it off; "Wherever you are comfortable. You must be tired..."

I relaxed into the pillows, feeling no real desire to move. After all, it was only to rest; I could repair to the Countess's chamber before we slept for the night. "I am, actually."

"Are you hungry?"

Suddenly famished, I happily tucked into the food he had brought, and he sat on the chair beside me and joined me in a glass of wine.

"We shall need to hire a nursemaid," he said, and I nodded, waiting until I had finished the excellent bread to answer.

"Yes. May I meet with any candidates?"

"Of course," he said, seeming surprised I would ask - but I knew of many men who would hire a nurse without their wife having met them. If I were to entrust my child to someone, I needed to know that I could trust them fully.

"It's quiet here, isn't it," I commented, so used to the constant comings and goings at the Palace.

He nodded; "I am surprised to say I have missed it," he said.

I smiled; "Me too. I thought I would always live in the city, but now..."

Our eyes met, and I realised with a jolt that those little things in common were creeping in again. I had been pushing them away, but now they blossomed, and I had to remind myself that the closer I got to him, the harder it would be if - or when - he hurt me, or decided to leave.

"Did you get a chance to tell your father, before we left?" he asked, and I realised that I had not even considered doing so.

"No," I answered honestly. "I guess I shall write, once things have progressed further. We shall have to enquire about a midwife..."

"I'll speak to Mrs Batton. She knows everything and everyone round here - she'll be able to tell us."

"Thank you." I did not ask if he had told his father; somehow I knew he would not have. Besides, the topic would only bring up misery, and I was too tired for that.

I yawned, and he immediately removed the tray from my lap.

"Close your eyes," he insisted. "I'll make sure everything has been prepared here for our return."

I nodded, my eyes already closing. "Kit?" I mumbled, and he paused on his way out of the door.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

I was asleep before he replied.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Christopher

Of course, the house was already set up to accommodate us - I should not have been surprised to realise that. And so when my 'making sure' lasted mere moments, I suddenly found myself with too much time on my hands to deal with the many thoughts and emotions that had been going through my head.

I tried to lose myself in a Greek translation I had been working on - but to no avail. The letters on the page were constantly interrupted with thoughts of Alice, images of Alice, notions of what having a proper family might be like.

I loved her. I loved her, and she was carrying my child - why could I not just tell her that? Perhaps it would fix whatever had gone wrong between us. She knew now that I had married her because I had wanted to - not simply because my father had tried to withhold money. But she did not know the full extent of my feeling...the extent of my devotion to her.

Devotion.

It was the only way I could describe it; she was the first thing I thought of when I awoke, and the last thing when I went to sleep. I worried for her safety, and now of the babe's safety. I thought of ways to make her happy, and was delighted to see her smile or laugh.

I shoved the book to one side and set off to survey the house, finding myself very quickly reaching the nursery. It was a small room, two doors down from ours, with a beautiful window that looked out over the grounds. Sun streamed in, and I made quick work of pulling off all the dust coverings from the furniture, opening the windows when the dust motes began to make me cough.

I wondered who had slept in that beautiful mahogany crib; I did not think I had been brought here as a baby, but perhaps Francis had. Or maybe it came from my father and his siblings' time, for I knew they had spent a great deal of time here in their youth.

And now my child, mine and Alice's, would be using it. I had never thought much about having children, other than in an abstract way - but now the idea of having a legacy I could pass on to them seemed more important than ever. Perhaps I needed to learn how to be a decent Earl, before I had to become one; and how to be a decent father, before I was thrust into that role too. I did not feel I had much knowledge of how to parent from my own childhood - if anything, given our relationship, it seemed to be a clear guide as to how *not* to be a father.

I sat in the great wooden rocking chair, and surveyed the room. I was already concerned that I was not the husband Alice wanted, or the husband she deserved; now I had to worry about being a terrible father, too. The chair rocked, creaking a little, but the motion was comforting, like being at sea on a gentle tide.

When would I next set sail, I wondered? I had found the idea of marrying and leaving a wife and children abhorrent, even before I had fallen in love with Alice. So would I never set off on an adventure again?

I leaned back in the chair and let my eyes flutter closed for a moment. This - marriage, children - was enough of an adventure for now. My longing to leave England and rarely return had vanished, and in its place was a desire to make things work.

"Oh, sorry my lord." The door had opened without me realising, and Mrs Batton stood in the doorway, watching me with a bemused look. "I heard creaking, and didn't know you were up here."

"No matter, Mrs Batton," I said.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, looking at the dust sheets strewn around the floor.

"Yes, yes, everything's fine," I said, pulling myself up from the chair. "But I should like this room to be dusted, please."

"Of course, my lord. Is it... is it to be needed?"

I grinned; "I believe so. And if we could sit down one day to discuss the hiring of a nurse, Mrs Batton, and a midwife, I should appreciate your input."

She smiled; "Of course my lord, whenever is convenient." And then she clapped her hands together. "It has been such a long time

since there have been children here!"

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Alice

I awoke from several hours of rest to find the sun setting behind the tall trees that surrounded the estate. For once, I did not feel sick, and I decided to forgo any formal clothes and stick with the simple woollen dress I was wearing. After all, I was at home now; it would only be Kit and our staff who saw me. It would be a while before I would need to think about letting out my clothes, but for today being comfortable felt more important than anything else.

Despite the food I had eaten before sleep had engulfed me, I found I was hungry, and so made my way to the great hall - where Kit was sat, making notes on a large piece of parchment, a bowl of fruit before him.

"Good evening," he said. "Did you manage to rest?"

I nodded, seating myself beside him and reaching for an apple from the bowl. "What are you so busy with?" I asked.

He grinned; "Plans. Plans for the estate, plans for the nursery, plans for hiring staff..."

It was lovely to see him so enthusiastic; there was almost a glow of happiness around him as he made another note, and I felt like some of that happiness belonged to me, too.

We could start again, here, and be happy - friends, and husband and wife. He was right - we could be a family together, without being in love.

Or without admitting we were in love, anyway.

"What's first on your list?" I asked, and he told me of new farming techniques he had read about, and how he planned to ride out to speak with the tenant farmers and see if the yield could be improved.

I nodded, and smiled, and found myself very content with the fact that I had married such an intelligent man.

"And I spoke with Mrs Batton today, about some candidates for a midwife and a nursemaid."

I laughed; "We might be getting a bit ahead of ourselves, Kit."

"It's good to be organised," he said, and I didn't disagree with him. I had expected him to be pleased that I had become pregnant so quickly - I had not expected him to throw himself so wholeheartedly into planning for our lives with a child. It made me love him even more - and that made knowing he did not love me even more painful.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Christopher

We sat before the fire that evening, drinking warm spiced wine and playing cards. Although Alice had not played much, she was a quick study, and soon she was beating me as often as I was her.

"Did you not play cards at the palace?" I asked her, as she collected them from the table.

"Not really," she said. "Occasionally - but the Queen preferred us to spend our time doing more worthwhile pursuits - and before that, as I'm sure you can imagine, my father was not much of a game-player."

I imagined his stern, unsmiling face and could see what she meant.

"What was considered worthwhile?" I asked, taking them from her and dealing them out again.

"Music, reading, sewing, attending chapel," she reeled off.

"You still owe me that shirt," I said with a smile.

"Well, I'll have plenty of time here to sit and sew, won't I?" she said.

"There'll be baby clothes to make, too," I said, my eyes meeting hers shyly, and we both grinned. I knew now was the time; I needed to tell her I loved her. Even if she did not feel the same, she needed to know - and how I wanted our baby to be raised in a family full of love.

"Alice," I said, clearing my throat as she looked at me expectantly. "I- I need to tell you... I have realised-"

There was a knock on the door, and I swore under my breath before calling for the annoying interruption to enter. A page in the King's livery opened the door, looking like he had been riding hard for

hours.

If he had been sent after we left and had arrived now, I supposed he must have been.

"My lord, my lady," he said, sweeping a bow. "His Majesty the King has sent me urgently with this letter."

My heart sank as I took the folded parchment, sealed with the King's own mark, from the boy, and ripped it open.

Lord Danley,

I need you to return to the Palace urgently, before accompanying my men abroad. This is highly confidential - tell no-one. I shall give further details when you arrive.

Henry R

"What is it?" Alice asked, urgency and concern in her tone. And yet I could not say - for when the most powerful man in England tells you to 'tell no-one', you surely must obey.

"The King requires me back at the palace," I said, for surely that was allowed. "Urgently. I am so sorry."

And I was; sorry that I had not told her I loved her, sorry that my King was commanding I attend him, and then go abroad. How long would I be away? I could not know, or say, and inwardly I railed against this power that King Henry had over all his subjects.

But of course I could not say that out loud - and this was what came of having the King's favour, I supposed. Mere months earlier I would have been ecstatic about an adventure for the King, proving myself while sailing on a vessel financed by the country's purse. I would not have had thoughts of rebelling, of refusing, of trying to think of an excuse the King would legitimately accept.

That my wife was pregnant?

That would not be enough, and I knew it. She was not due for several months - he would not see any reason for me to be here.

Not when he felt he needed me elsewhere.

"Why?" she asked, sharply, and I ran a hand through my hair as I struggled for an answer.

"I am not sure," I said, a hint of truth in my words. "He says he will inform me upon my arrival." I had already screwed up the paper, hoping she would not ask to see it, and I shoved it into a pocket as I fished out a coin for the boy.

"You can go to the kitchens and ask for food and a bed for the night, if you wish," I said, and he swept me a bow of thanks and departed.

"Kit," she said, and I struggled to meet her gaze. "Must you go?" There was so much emotion in those words that I almost felt tears welling in my eyes.

"I must," I said, my voice grave. "If I could refuse..." The rest of the sentence went unsaid, but I hoped she understood. If there was anyway out of this, I would have taken it - but there was not.

"I shall have to leave in the morning."

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Alice

I had let it happen yet again. I had believed everything was all right, that we could be happy in this marriage and raise this child in a warm and loving place.

I had believed my heart would not be decimated once more.

And yet only hours into our return, he was being summoned back to Court - and I could tell he was lying to me about the reason. I did not know why, but he did not want me to see that piece of paper; he could not give me a straight answer as to why the King needed him so urgently.

My mind strained to think of possible reasons, as he told me he would be leaving in the morning.

"For how long?"

He avoided my glare as he answered. "I do not know, Alice; the King has insisted, I cannot dictate..."

I sighed; of course he could not dictate to the King. But was there someone else he wanted to return for? A mistress, perhaps? I wished I could just ask him outright, but somehow the words seemed to stick in my throat. Was it my right to know? I had told him I would never love him...

"I am tired," I announced, standing so quickly he stumbled as he tried to stand too. "I believe I will go to bed."

"Alice..."

"Goodnight, Kit."

Briefly, I considered sleeping in the Countess's chamber, but I dismissed the thought. As broken as my heart was now, I did not know how long Kit would be gone, and there was plenty of time for sleeping alone and licking my wounds. For now I would sleep in the

bed I had rested in earlier, and if he joined me, I would try to enjoy the presence of his warm body, without questioning why he was leaving me - now, when I felt I needed him the most.

Chapter Sixty

Christopher

She knew I was lying - but what else could I do? The King had asked for my silence, and it was about more than loyalty; betraying the King was treason, and I had no desire to have my head parted from my body.

I drank the rest of my wine in one gulp, and then called for the new manservant we had hired to instruct him to pack my belongings up again. I had been looking forward to returning to Chichester Place for weeks, and now I would get to spend just one night here. How long would the King expect me to be overseas? I wasn't even sure that was something I could ask, except perhaps to beg to be allowed home before the babe was born.

That would be months - months in which I would not see Alice. Months in which I would not feel her skin against mine, hear the sound of her laughter or be able to admit to her that I loved her.

I poured another glass of wine. Should I tell her now, before I left? Wake her from her slumber, and tell her that despite our discussion, I was madly in love with her?

No.

She was angry with me, and saying I loved her might mend that - but that was not why I wanted to say it. And would I be able to leave if she was happy about my declaration? I did not know if I could tear myself away, despite the need to obey the King.

So I would have to wait until I returned, and hope that perhaps absence would make her heart pine for me like I knew mine would pine for her.

When - after more wine than was probably advisable - I made my way up the stairs to my bedchamber, my heart ached at the sight of her small body beneath the blankets.

Divesting myself of my clothes without caring where they landed,

I climbed into bed next to her and hesitated. I could tell she was hurt by my leaving; would she be angry to find me in bed with her? But then she had chosen to sleep in my bed...

And then she rolled towards me, pressing her face into my neck, so I could feel her warm breath as she slowly inhaled and exhaled in a deep sleep. I wrapped my arms around her and held her close, whispering before I drifted into sleep: "I love you."

Chapter Sixty-One

Alice

I watched him ride away without letting the tears spill from my eyes. We had made love that morning as though we might never do so again, and although I was hurt by his leaving, I had pushed that away for later, holding on to those last few moments I had with him before we were separated by the King's request.

When I could no longer see him, or the coach he was riding ahead of, I let the tears fall, blurring my vision of the verdant green land that stretched out as far as I could see. It was so different to the landscape of London, and yet I had craved it as soon as I had known I was carrying this child.

Before then, really. But I had thought keeping Kit - and my feelings for him - at bay would be easier at court.

Clearly I had been wrong; the easiest way was for us to be miles apart.

Stop crying, I told myself sternly, making my way to the room at the far end of the house which had a writing desk situated in front of a beautiful window. This would be the opportunity to build back those walls around my heart that Kit had so effectively demolished. It hurt too much to let myself think love would work out, to only find it was as disastrous and painful as I had always imagined. More, in fact.

As I sat to write to my father with news of my pregnancy, I made another resolution. I would use this time alone to rest, and take care of myself, and prepare for the baby I was excited to bring into this world. And when Kit returned, I was sure my ardour for him would have dampened, without his constant presence to fan the flames - and we could be friends.

I could be his friend; I could be his wife. I would not sit around for the rest of my life hoping he would fall in love with me; hoping he would not break my heart.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Christopher

I tapped my foot, trying not to show my frustration but struggling to hide it. I had arrived at court hours earlier, having left my home and my wife without being willing to, and yet now had been made to wait outside the King's chambers for hours. Of course, I knew he was a busy man - but he was the one who had summoned me urgently.

A gaggle of Dukes exited the door, looking serious and deep in conversation, and my stomach twisted. Where would he ask me to go? And how long for?

Eventually I was called in, and I entered to find Henry, along with some of his closest advisers, huddled around a table, with the same map in the middle that had been there before.

"Ah, Danley, come in. I appreciate you returning."

"I am at your Majesty's disposal," I said with a bow, trying to not let my irritation colour my tone.

"I have a delegation travelling to France, and to Spain," he said, gesturing to the map. "To discuss a very important and personal matter. I can only send men I trust - and I trust you, Danley."

"I am honoured." In a way I was; of course it was humbling to have the King of England count me among men he trusted. But part of me wished he didn't even know who I was, so I did not have to be involved in whatever this was.

"I also know you are a competent sailor, and have a good working knowledge of this journey. So I am asking you to accompany a few others on this voyage. I must tell you that there are questions being asked about the validity of my marriage to Queen Katherine."

I schooled my face into what I hoped was a shocked expression; this, of course, was not news; rumours had been flying around the Court for weeks, including the idea that he might try to remove

Katherine so he could marry his mistress, Anne Boleyn.

"My advisers must travel to visit dignitaries from France and Spain and see what support we will get in this matter. This is, of course, a matter of great delicacy..."

"Of course."

"Excellent. So you will sail two days hence," Henry said, jumping to his feet. "And I thank you for your service. Now, I am in the mood to ride! Will you join me, Danley?"

I hid a sigh, and nodded. "I will just need to change."

I made it back to the stables in record time, hoping to be able to have a moment to let the King know that Alice was pregnant, and communicate my desire to be back in time for her confinement.

A fresh horse had been saddled for me, and as we set off I revelled in his speed, pushing him faster despite the ache in my thighs from hours already on horseback that day. Henry laughed as he tried to race me, the other men falling behind, and when we reached less populated territory, he slowed down to allow them to catch up, and I pulled on the reins to halt my mount too.

"I am grateful for your Majesty's faith in me," I began, knowing flattery was a good way to ensure his continued favour.

"You have served me well so far," he said, by means of explanation.

"Thank you, Your Grace." I paused, noting the other men catching up, and decided to take my chance. "I have recently found out my wife is with child."

He grinned, and clapped me on the back; "Congratulations! Wonderful news." There was no jealousy, it seemed, despite his well-publicised desire for a son.

"The babe would be due in the autumn, and I was hoping to be home by then..."

The rest of the group were in ear shot now, and Henry encouraged his mount onwards, with mine in close pursuit.

"I'm sure you will be, Danley. I will reward you greatly for this

deed - it is of the utmost importance to me."

I nodded, knowing that was the most I was likely to get out of him. I did not think he understood that I was not desperate to be bestowed with riches and titles, but merely to spend time with my wife and to meet my child on the day of their birth.

"May I tell Alice where I am headed?" I asked, one final request.

"No. I'm sorry, but if anyone were to find out what we are asking, and whom we are asking... you may tell her you must go abroad, but no specifics."

My heart sank, even as the King sped up with a boyish smile on his face.

"Very well," I answered, although he was already out of earshot.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Alice

I spent the day wrapped in a blanket by the fire, trying to lose myself in a book I had always adored. The poetry had always seemed beautiful, even if I did not believe in the fanciful notions of love it portrayed - but now it seemed it was soured for me by the terrible knowledge that the overwhelming, all-encompassing love in its lines did exist.

And was just as painful as I had always feared.

The next few days passed in a blur of monotony, as I tried to figure out what my role would be here, alone. I was not pregnant enough to need to sit and do nothing - and I thought I might lose my mind if that was all I did until Kit returned. I considered walking into the village, but could not think of a reason.

The letter was brought just after I had finished my lunch, and I noted Kit's seal on the back. It had been seven days since he had ridden off at the King's behest, and I hated to admit how much I had missed him.

Dear Alice, it read, and my heart swelled to read the endearment in his neat script.

I have been called abroad on the King's business. I am sorry to leave you for so long, and hope you will be comfortable at Chichester Place. While I am gone, please buy items or hire staff as you see fit, with my blessing. Everything I have is yours.

Look after yourself and our babe, and I will be home as soon as I can.

Your husband,

Christopher Danley

I read it so many times I thought I could probably recite it. Yet again, no real detail - no mention of where abroad, or why, or with whom. I tried not to let my mind focus on that, or ruminate on the

possibilities, as I attempted to get my head round the fact that he would be gone for quite some time. Weeks, definitely; months were even more likely. The sea crossing alone could take days or weeks, depending on where he was going.

I needed a purpose. I had always had one, and I realised that was what I needed here. While I could not be a wife to an absent man, and I could not yet be a mother to this unborn baby, I *could* be a good mistress of the house. I could learn how to be a future countess, and ensure when Kit returned everything was even better than when he had left.

At least then I would not waste time pining for a man who did not love me.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Christopher

It had been four days in the end before we had set sail, with bad weather halting our departure, and the King had invited me to dine and drink with him while we waited.

He was in a jolly mood, and the group of men he surrounded himself with seemed only to improve that. We joked about wine, hunting, women - and it was only when I went to bed at night that I realised something.

Henry was not a happy man. He was trapped in a marriage with a woman he was no longer in love with, and he lusted after a woman who it seemed would not have him without a ring on her finger.

My own thoughts of Henry's behaviour aside, it hit me as I lay in the dark in the large and lonely bed, that I knew what I needed to be happy. And it wasn't travel, and it wasn't drink, and it wasn't women.

It was one woman.

It was a family.

And once I had returned from this trip, I planned to avoid ever leaving their side again.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Alice

I heard nothing from Kit for the next two weeks, and instead busied myself with getting to know how Chichester Place, and the farms it supported, ran. I requested the ledgers, and although I got a few quizzical looks, they were handed to me. I settled myself at Kit's desk day after day, and put to use the years I had spent in a house with a man who lived and breathed numbers.

When I realised that several people had compiled the figures, and that some had awful penmanship, I set to copying them out into fresh ledgers, enjoying the calming action of dipping my quill in ink and reproducing the figures neatly, noting where some values were missing. When the sun shone, I headed into the village, meeting with the farmers myself to find out the years when crops had failed, and what was being done to expand the farms. I was asked about supporting repairs and the need for a local school, and I promised I would investigate the possibilities.

It was on a Sunday, when I had attended chapel and had decided to sit down by the little duck pond to rest in the sunshine a while, that I decided what my purpose here would be: to establish a school. Ducklings followed a mother duck around the water, and a mother with two children walked past, laughing as they made quacking noises at the ducks.

A school was important, and it was something that most poorer folk never got a chance to experience. Perhaps I could even push for a school that would educate girls, too; if I could find a way to finance it, surely I could offer the local village girls the opportunities I had been lucky enough to be afforded? Perhaps I would speak with the local church, I thought, closing my eyes to the warm sun. They must be interested in helping the children...



"Lady Danley?" I must have dozed off while lying down after lunch - a new routine, now that the sickness was accompanied by

near-constant fatigue, and a slightly rounded belly - and I became aware of a voice calling my name, accompanied by a soft knocking.

"Enter," I said, aware of how dry my mouth was.

"Sorry, m'lady, but Lord Danley- Lord Francis Danley - is downstairs."

I tried not to let my face betray the hope I had felt at the name 'Lord Danley', but I doubted I was successful. "Thank you," I said. "I shall be down in a moment."

She nodded and disappeared, and I reached for the drink I had left on the sideboard and swished it round my mouth, trying to get my bearings. Everything felt a little wobbly whenever I woke up, and I did not want to rush down the stairs when I was unsteady on my feet - even though my head was keen for me to find out why Francis was here. I had not seen him since that awful night, the night which had driven a wedge between Kit and I.

The night my lovesick heart had been broken.

Checking myself in the looking glass, I straightened my dress and re-attached my hood. I did not think my growing stomach was obvious beneath my dress, but I still smoothed my hand over it a few times, feeling a strength from knowing I was not alone.

"Lady Danley," he said as I approached him in the Great Hall, sweeping me an over-effusive bow before beaming at me.

"Francis," I said. "What a pleasant surprise." In truth, I did not have the energy to entertain a boy who I barely knew - but I supposed I should be polite, since he was family.

"I heard my brother had been required to leave the country, and wanted to offer you any help you might need in his absence."

I almost raised an eyebrow; did he think me incapable of surviving without a man? I supposed he would not be alone in the view. His gesture, I was sure, was meant to be kind, and so I tried not to bristle at the assumption.

"That is very kind of you. Shall I call for supper?"

"If you wish; I would be grateful to join you."

Was it rude to ask him how long he planned to be here?

"Should I have a room made up?" I asked, deciding that was the most polite way to find out.

"I thought, if you approved, I could stay for the next week, to help you with the running of the place."

"Oh," I said quickly, "I could not impose on you like that." I was really starting to become irritated with his assumption that I needed his help so desperately - he wasn't yet out of the schoolroom, and I was coping perfectly fine on my own.

"Oh, it's no imposition," he said. "I have a break from school right now, and I would not like my brother to think I have neglected my familial duties."

I pressed my eyes closed for a second as he poured wine, and realised there was no way I could refuse without seeming churlish and rude.

"Well, it would be lovely to have your company," I said, not willing to acknowledge his repeated offers of 'help'.

"Excellent," he said with a grin. "To your good health." He raised his goblet and drained it, and I found myself dreading the next week in his company.



Everywhere I turned, there Francis was; watching as I continued my attempts at making the ledgers truly legible, asking question after question when I decided to walk into town, and when another wave of nausea hit me, he was there as I ran to empty the contents of my stomach.

"Are you well?" he asked, and I nodded, taking a seat and a few deep breaths. I wondered if I should tell him I was with child; I had not yet sent the letter to my father, and I doubted Kit had told his - but would Francis notice, here with me for a week? He was only young, and I did not know how much he knew of women; would he notice the sickness, or the gentle roundness that was appearing round my middle?

For some reason, I stopped myself telling him, instead blaming

too much walking and not enough sleep.

"Ah," he said, clicking his tongue in sympathy. "I am sure you are missing my brother."

I was - but I wasn't going to tell anyone that, let alone his annoying younger brother.

"So," I said, picking up the sewing I had been working on before the sickness had overwhelmed me. "What are your plans when you finish school?"

His chest puffed out and there was a sparkle in his eye as he answered. "Father plans to find me a position at court. Although I am not his heir, he wishes for me to find a high place in society."

There was something in his tone that made me bristle a little, as he spoke about not being the heir, and my fingers flitted to my stomach for a moment. I was carrying the heir's heir - and I wasn't sure Francis would be so happy about that.

"That sounds like a wonderful plan," I said, trying to sound sincere. "Do you see your mother often?"

"She visits me at school," he said. "And I stay there at Christmas. This year, however, Father has promised I may attend the celebrations at court."

"They are spectacular," I said, feeling sorry for his mother, losing the precious time she had with her only son.

"You lived at court, did you not?"

I nodded; "I served Queen Katherine."

"I hear her star is waning," he said, sipping his wine, and I felt a flash of anger for my old mistress.

"You should not listen to rumours," I said icily. "Especially about the Queen of England."

He dipped his head and was silent for a moment, and I wondered if I needed to apologise; he was just a child, after all.

"Of course," he said, arrogance dripping from his tone, any thoughts of an apology gone from my mind immediately. "Men must be forgiven their... dalliances."

This was a wholly unsuitable topic for us to be discussing, and I was shocked he had brought it up - but part of me wished to follow it to its conclusion, wherever that may be.

"Oh?" I said, trying to sound disinterested, focusing on the needle moving through the fabric. A shirt for Kit; I did not know why I was sewing it now, when he had gone, when I did not know where he would be or why he had left me - but I had begun to sew it the night he left, and I could not bring myself to stop.

"The King, if rumour is to be believed, is a popular man, among women. As are many of his friends. Lord Buckingham, I have heard... well, tales that are not appropriate, I am sure."

I did not answer - none of this was appropriate, and he surely knew that. There was some point he wished to make.

"And Kit..." Ah. There it was. A point I did not want to hear, but which I could not stop myself from listening to. "Well, he has always been very popular with the ladies - at Court, as well as abroad, or so he always told me. A warm bed in every port!" He chuckled, and then seemed to remember to whom he was speaking, and slapped a hand to his mouth.

"Oh, do forgive me, sister," he said, and the familial term sounded so wrong coming from his lips. "I have had too much wine, and did not think. Ignore me."

I nodded, staying silent, the needle moving backwards and forwards so swiftly it was like I was no longer in control of it.

"I'm sure," he was saying in the background, never one to know when to hold his tongue, "that it is not the case any longer. Well, he hasn't been away long, has he, and you are only just married, and-"

I stood abruptly, causing him to leap to his feet. "I believe I walked too much today," I said, knowing he would believe in an instant that I was so fragile a bit of walking could make me ill. "I must rest. I shall take supper in my room."

"Good night, sister," he said, reaching to press a kiss to my hand that made my skin crawl. What was it - other than his incessant chatter - that made me so uncomfortable around him?

"Good night."

I resisted the urge to run, to take the stairs two at a time, and made my way to my room as though nothing was on my mind.

And yet once more, my mind was in turmoil. Here was Kit's brother, confirming everything I had worried about - popular with women, one at every port. If he were to go abroad for months, what reason would he have to not bed the women he found there? We were not in love - and when he returned, I would be heavy with child, and then confined, and so my bed would be off limits to him anyway.

But the thought of him sharing a bed, sharing the passions we had shared with another woman - that made me want to cry until there were no tears left in my body.

I stripped off my dress and hood, climbing under the blankets in just my shift, and hoped that the tears would soothe the pain in my heart, and wipe the torrid images from my mind. But the tears would not come, and so I lay there, alone, surrounded by emotions that I had no idea how to deal with.

I had never felt so alone before, in all my life.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Christopher

France was our first port of call, and the journey had been rough; the men not so used to sailing as I had spent most of it emptying their stomachs as the ship rolled beneath us. I expected the thrill of adventure to course through my veins, as it had done every time I had stepped on a ship since that first time at sixteen, when I had defied my father and boarded a merchant ship so I could see a bit more of the world.

But all I could think of was Alice, and how quickly I could return to her, and what I could write to her that would make her realise that I did not want to be separated from her.

"I don't understand how you have done that for years and enjoyed it," Lord Grant said as we alighted, and I grinned.

"You get used to it," I said, although I had never been afflicted with sea-sickness, if truth be told.

Despite the weather, nothing had befallen us on the journey over, and so the main part of my role here was over. Yes, I would attend the discussions about the King's marriage - but I was not responsible for them. Until we departed for Spain, and then hopefully home again, I would simply do as I was told.

As we rode another two hours by horseback to reach the tavern we would be staying at, I composed a letter to Alice in my mind. Although I did not wish to tell her I loved her on paper, I wanted her to know that she was on my mind - and that when I returned, I would make it up to her for leaving so soon after we had been married.

In some ways it felt like a lifetime; my whole world view had tilted when I had married Alice, and though it had only been a handful of weeks, I knew in my heart I would never be the same again.

"Do you have parchment and a quill I may have?" I asked the innkeeper in French as he offered to show us to our rooms, and I

tipped him generously when he reappeared with a scrap of parchment, and a serviceable quill and ink.

"We're having a drink, before we eat," Lord Grant said.

"I'll join you later," I said, ignoring the jokes about love letters that the men made as I departed. It was a love letter, in every way but one, and I wasn't ashamed of that fact.

I was only ashamed of how long it had taken me to realise the strength of my feelings.

My dearest Alice, I wrote, when I reached my room and sat at the tiny, well-used table.

It is difficult to be away from you, having spent so much time with you since we married. I hope you know that I would be with you if I could, and how much I look forward to the day I can return to our home.

I hope you and the babe are well, and that you are comfortable at Chichester Place. You are welcome to change anything you want - but I hope you will have done so long before you receive this letter.

I have never felt at home anywhere before, except perhaps at sea. Know that now, I see Chichester Place as home, because it has you, and it will have our child.

Believe me that I will return as soon as I possibly can.

Your husband, always,

Kit Danley

I dripped hot wax onto it and used my ring to seal it, wishing there was some way of getting it to her sooner. It would take weeks, undoubtedly - and part of me hoped I would be home by then, although I knew it was unlikely.

It would all be all right, though, I told myself that; I would serve the King, then I would go home, and live with my wife and child in a home full of love and happiness. What more could I want?

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Alice

Francis had only been gone three days when I received the letter, and in those three days I had come to enjoy the peace and quiet of Chichester Place. Francis - despite his presumably good intentions - never seemed to shut up, and it was always worthless contributions. I knew that was cruel to even think, and of course I would never say it aloud, but never once had he said something interesting, or kind, or thought-provoking. He had gossiped, he had tried to sound like he understood things he clearly did not, and he had complained.

It had been a long week, and as polite as I was when he left, I was very pleased to see his horse ride away.

So when hooves thundered up the pathway to the house, I felt an instant sense of panic that he had returned for some reason. Relief flooded through me when I looked out of the window and saw it was not him, but a young lad carrying a letter.

Mrs Batton brought it to me with a bite to eat and a delicious spiced drink she swore by for morning sickness, and I smiled and took it gratefully. She was a lovely, quiet, comforting presence that made me feel a little less like I was facing this pregnancy alone. She had children, she had grandchildren, and she had served many pregnant women before - and so if I had a question, at least I knew who I could ask.

"How are you feeling this afternoon, Lady Danley?" she asked, as she did every day.

I smiled; "Tired," I admitted. "But less sick."

"Excellent. You need to stop walking to the village and the farms so often!"

With a laugh, I took the drink and sipped its warming goodness. "I will become too big to do so soon enough, I am sure."

She tutted, but left me with a smile and the note, and I ran a hand

over my stomach soothingly for a moment before I opened it.

Dearest sister, it read, and my heart dropped. I had no siblings, and as Francis had begun to use that term so regularly while he visited, there was no doubting who it was from. What on Earth could he need to say to me, mere days after he had left?

I am afraid I must write to you with troubling news, but given our close kinship, I did not feel I could conceal it from you. It is not like me to pay mind to gossips - I laughed at that point, even though the tone of the letter had me a little concerned - but this news seems to be on everyone's lips at court.

My brother, Christopher, is rumoured to have a mistress here at court, and it is said that she is with child. I do not know her name, but I shall make enquiries and report back to you. I heard this news as soon as I arrived back at Court and immediately wished to inform you. I am sorry to burden you with such news, dear sister, and hope you will tell me if there is any comfort I can bring.

Your devoted servant,

Francis Danley

I felt bile rise up in my throat that I was sure was unrelated to my pregnancy, and had to take several breaths to keep myself from rushing to the chamberpot.

A mistress.

A child.

Surely... surely it could not be true?

But what would Francis have to gain by lying to me?

The thought of Kit lying with another woman had been abhorrent; but the thought of him having a child with someone else, when he had seemed so excited about this child, about us building a home and a family and a life together... that was a whole new level of pain I had not known existed.

I threw the letter into the fire, not willing to read its hateful words again, even though I knew they were seared onto my mind.

I was done with Kit Danley. I would have his baby, and then we

would live separate lives. There would be no need for us to share a home, let alone a bed, once I had provided him with an heir.

As hot tears ran down my cheeks in rivers, I composed a cold letter in my head that I would write as soon as I could do so without soiling the paper with my weeping. I would tell Kit to stay away; I would tell him to come only when the child was born, and then I could take the babe and find somewhere else to live.

Somewhere where I would not have to see Kit, or his mistress, or any other children he might sire.



I instructed the stable lad to take the letter to the palace, presuming that was where Kit would go whenever he returned to these shores. There was no point in sending it anywhere else, for even if I had an address, he would surely have moved on by the time a letter reached him.

No, it could wait at the palace, as cold and alone as my heart felt now, until Kit returned and realised I wished for him to remain as far away from me as possible.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Christopher

Four Months Later

A beard covered much of my face, and my dark hair hung well past my chin, when we finally set foot on English shores once more. Every journey had been more arduous than the last, and when the Spanish had not taken too kindly to the questions we had been sent to ask, we found ourself imprisoned - although in relative luxury - for several long weeks, while they waited for word from King Henry that we did indeed come on his behalf.

Had he sent word, I wondered every day? Or would he leave us to languish here, not caring that we had our own lives to return to, that I had a pregnant wife who I had not heard from in months.

I had sent several letters, but none had received a reply, and I hoped that was due to the lack of reliable post, and not because she was angry at my lengthy absence. I had warned her it could be months, but never had I expected how long it would take for us to return to England once more.

Would the King be happy with the answers his men had retrieved? I doubted it, but then I doubted the King was very happy with most things. His only desire was a male heir - and anything that stood in his way was a further addition to his misery.

We rode hard back to London, and I wished the journey were shorter so that we did not have to waste time at an inn. But the horses could not ride all night, and neither could we, and so I spent another agonising night away from my beloved, listening to men I had grown sick of drink and joke and wonder if they could tempt the woman serving us into their beds.

I closed my eyes as I waited for our meal to arrive and tried to block out the din of the chatter in the inn. I was unused to hearing the sound of so much English in a confined space and frustration built inside me at the fact that I was in my homeland but not yet home.

"What's bothering you, Danley?" Lord Soames asked me, and I opened my eyes with a sigh.

"Hasn't had a woman in several long months!" Lord Richmond replied before I had a chance, with a loud guffaw.

I rolled my eyes.

"Look at him, with that wild beard - it's no wonder!" A local lass, drunk from too much wine and keen to impress, joined in, and everyone around the table struggled to control their gleeful laughter.

Everyone but me.

"Oh," Soames said, in a whispered voice with a conspiratorial wink. "It wasn't for lack of offers, let me tell you. He's a handsome man under all that hair."

"Why didn't you take them up on the offer, then?" the woman asked, and I wanted to complain about her rudeness and refuse to answer - except the answer was such an easy one, and one I had no problem voicing.

"I have a wife," I said, knowing that the men around me would laugh.

"Don't bother most men," the woman said with a shrug.

"I'm married," Richmond said, snaking an arm around the woman's waist.

"Well it bothers me."

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Alice

If I had calculated correctly, I still had three months before this babe would make its way into the world - and yet I felt like my stomach could stretch no further. My walks into the village had ceased to be possible, and the idea of getting upon a horse was laughable. And so I wandered the gardens, enjoying the roses and the tulips as I made my slow journey, before settling on an ornate stone bench, with one hand on my rapidly expanding the stomach.

The babe kicked, as it so often did, and I smiled softly to myself and rubbed the area gently. Thank goodness no-one ever visited; I could wear loose dresses all I liked, without worrying about propriety, and not shut myself in a darkened room as I knew the Queen had been expected to do in every one of her pregnancies. With no husband around, and a small retinue of faithful staff, I could afford to do things the way I wanted to, without being told I must obey.

As I looked out over the farmland, I let out a sigh. In so many ways, things were going well; I had control over my own little domain here. The accounts were in order, and the farmers had - after I had subtly suggested it to a few over a good deal of wine - come together to purchase a herd of cattle, who looked like they would make a good profit for many years to come. The harvest was predicted to be bountiful, and renovations to the main house had begun. The Church had shown some interest in my plans for a local school - although that enthusiasm had waned a little when I had mentioned the idea that girls might be educated there too. With the improvements to the land, however, I hoped it might be possible to fund it without needing their contributions.

I had not heard from Kit in many, many months. There had been one letter, after I had sent the missive to the palace telling him to stay away - but I could not bear to read it. It still sat, unopened, in the drawer by my bed, and I tried very hard to forget its existence. Since then, nothing - and I did wonder whether he had returned to England, and received my message, and stayed away - or whether he was still abroad. Had his mistress given birth? Was there a child out there who

was half-sibling to this wonder that I carried within me?

I could not bring myself to hate this woman, whoever she was. I reserved my anger for Kit - and even that I tried to ignore, for the sake of the baby.

No, what I felt was loneliness, even with the gentle kicking and gymnastic movements that happened inside me daily. I was lonely, and my bed was big and cold and empty, and I did not want to admit that I missed Kit.

I had not admitted it to anyone out loud - but at night, I allowed myself to cry, and to admit it to myself very, very quietly. Being with Kit had been the closest I had ever been to another person - both physically and emotionally - and the loss of that had taken its toll. I had not realised what I was missing, living a life without love for so long - until I had felt it. And that love had lit up my whole life, making everything seem warmer and brighter for the brief period it had existed.

And now, without it, everything had lost its shine.

I took a deep breath, trying to shake myself out of this well of emotions I had fallen into. This was why I did not think about Kit during the day; it stopped anything from getting done. And soon, I told myself, the baby would arrive, and I would be filled with love once more.

Chapter Seventy

Christopher

Reporting back to the King would not take long, I told myself, as we approached the castle. Perhaps I could be on my way back to Chichester Place today. I could get a fresh horse, and if I had to ride in the dark - well, it was a risk I was willing to take.

We were shown to the King's waiting chamber, and as we stood around idly talking and hoping he would invite us in soon, a page appeared.

"Lord Danley?" he asked, and when I waved him over he approached with a letter. "This arrived some months ago, my lord," he said. "To be kept here until your return."

My interest piqued, I took the letter from him with hurried thanks and opened the seal.

Christopher,

I believe it best for all involved if you stay away upon your return. I know now of your infidelities, and am sure you would be happier remaining at Court. I shall write when the baby is born, and we can arrange where we shall be living.

Alice Danley

My head was a swirl of confusing thoughts as I read and reread the neatly formed words on the paper before me. Infidelities? I had not shown even a hint of interest in another woman since I had married Alice - and was thoroughly mocked for the fact. And had my letters telling her how desperate I was to be home not reached her? Damn it all, how could it be possible that I would return to such a dismissive letter?

Of course, it was then that we were called in to the King's chamber, and I hastily shoved the letter in my breast pocket, to be dealt with later. I would not be living apart from my wife - and there were clearly some things we needed to discuss.

Henry ranted and raved about the way the Spanish had treated us, although I thought privately that he probably could have had us released sooner if he had been truly committed to the idea. He pored over the letters we had brought back with us, and wanted meetings recounted until it grew dark outside and my heart grew weary.

Finally, finally, he seemed to have had enough, and even if he did not have all the answers he wanted, perhaps he realised there was nothing more to get out of us.

"Time for some food, and wine, and music!" he decreed, striding from the room and expecting us all to follow. We glanced at each other - I knew I was not the only one keen to return to my life - but then, of course, we followed. He was the King of England; there wasn't a choice.

A table had been set up for the King to dine publicly, which I did not think was a common occurrence these days, with another large table that I presumed was for us. The canopy of state covered the two seats at the royal table, and when the Queen was announced, I had to admit I was surprised.

He had sent us to query the support for the breaking of his marriage, and yet here he was, dining with us with his wife at his side.

We bowed, and she smiled, and I felt a surge of pity for this woman who seemed to always show her best side to the world. Was she getting the best side of her husband? That did not seem likely.

As dishes were sent down to us, with the King's compliments, I let my mind wander back over that letter. Where had Alice heard of my supposed infidelities - and why had she immediately believed it? That hurt more than I had expected; had I given her any reason to believe I would be unfaithful? That I wished for us to live separate lives?

I could not bring myself to make conversation; I had spent more months with these men than I had ever wished to, and there was nothing that needed to be said. Once the food had been cleared away and the musicians began to play their merry tunes, I watched the King approach one of the Queen's ladies and ask her to dance, and I felt that jolt of pity once more.

My eyes met hers across the room, and she gave a knowing smile. I wished I could ask her to dance, so she was not sat watching - but she was a Queen, and I was a mere Earl's son, and that would not be

acceptable.

When she stood, we all stood, and she made her way across the room, flanked by her remaining ladies. Soames bowed and asked one of them to dance; she giggled and joined him on the dance floor.

"Lord Danley," the Queen said. "Would you accompany me in this dance?"

I was shocked - as were my companions - but I nodded my head and offered her my arm.

The King noticed, but he did not look angered, which I was thankful for. There was a fine line at court, between doing what you felt was right and ensuring the King thought you were on his side.

"It is good to see you back at court," the Queen said, as we began the well-rehearsed steps of the Pavane.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"Your trip abroad was successful?" she asked, and I felt panic fill my lungs at such a direct question that I could not possibly answer.

I swallowed; "I am home alive," I said. "So I would consider it a success."

She laughed, and although I was sure she knew I was evading her question, she did not press further. "And how is your wife? She is much missed."

"I do not truly know," I admitted. "I hope to be reunited with her soon, at His Majesty's pleasure." Was I beyond begging him to let me return to my wife, to not keep me here for weeks as I knew he had done with many other lords in his service? No, I did not think I was above that - although I hoped it would not come to it.

"I am sorry you have been separated," she said, sounding sincere, even though our lengthy separation was at her husband's behest, not hers. "You seemed very happy in each other's company."

I smiled; "Yes, I believe we were."

"True love is rare in a marriage," she said, and I wondered how much she had read into my tone when talking about Alice. "To find someone you not only care about, and can be friends with, but who

you love more than anything else... if you find that, you should treasure it."

I nodded; her words rang true, but all I knew was that I loved Alice. She did not love me - and if her latest letter were to be believed, she wanted to live as far away from me as possible.

"You need a shave and a haircut," she said, with a twinkle in her eye, "Before you return to the lovely Alice."

I laughed then, the most sincere feeling of joy I had experienced in months. "You are right. I shall see to that before I request to go home."

Then the music came to an end, and the King came to take his Queen into the centre of the dance floor, and we all watched as they performed in front of us, the perfect image of marriage and happiness and royalty.

And it was all a lie.

But what I had - that was not a lie. And I needed to see to it that Alice knew, as strongly as I did, that what we had was worth holding onto.

Chapter Seventy-One

Alice

The sun was hot and relentless, and the larger I got the more I longed for cool autumn breezes. At least, I told myself, I was not at court, having to wear fine dresses and hoods and jewels no matter what the weather. No, I could sit in the gardens, in the shade of an old oak tree, in an old linen day dress that Mrs Batton had managed to let out for me.

I had brought a book, but was content to sit on a blanket on the ground, soaking up the peace and tranquility that surrounded me. My night's sleep had been disturbed, with the babe kicking and turning so often I was woken up nearly as soon as I had fallen asleep. But today I could enjoy the quiet, and recuperate some of my energy for my planned visit from the farmers' wives that afternoon. We had discussed the idea of a school, and they had been keen to get involved - both for the greater community need, and for the education of their own children that was sorely lacking. And so I had invited them to visit for supper, where we could discuss our ideas together.

"My lady!" called Mrs Batton, and I smiled as I saw her walking down the garden towards me. "I thought you might be peckish, so I've brought out some fruit, bread and cheese for you."

She held out a basket, and I reached up to take it from her. "That's ever so kind of you," I said, feeling a grumble in my stomach that agreed with her. "You take such good care of me."

She blushed; "You need to be looked after. It's hard work, growing a babe!"

I reached for an apple and gestured to the blanket. "Please, will you join me?"

"Oh, no, my lady, I was just-"

"Please, Mrs Batton?" Perhaps she heard the loneliness in my voice, or perhaps she just didn't want to upset me, but she settled herself on the corner of the blanket and took a piece of cheese when I

offered it.

"It's beautiful out here," I said, "Even when it's so hot!"

"I know we should not complain about fine weather," she said. "But it doesn't half make everything harder!"

I laughed; "Considering what a challenge I'm finding most things at the minute, I agree!"

We ate in comfortable silence for a moment, the birds tweeting around us, hopeful for a spare crumb.

"Do you know when Lord Danley might return?" she asked eventually, and I shook my head.

"He does not know how long his business will keep him away," I said, wondering if my anger towards him showed in my tone. I did not want to air our dirty laundry - but tongues would wag once he returned and I insisted upon separate households.

"Well, I'm sure it will be before the babe arrives," she said, always upbeat. She obviously thought her words would be a comfort, but they just sent me further into a panic.

"What was he like, as a child?" I asked suddenly, wanting to move away from painful talks of the future and live for a little while in the past.

"He only lived here a few years," she said, a smile playing on his lips. "He was raised in another home, to start with, with his wet nurse, after Lady Danley passed. And then the Earl decided he should be here, and get some fresh air, and so he lived here for a few years before he started school." She toyed with a blade of grass; "I doubt he even remembers."

She gazed off into the distance, and I did not wish to disturb her reverie; but after a few moments, she seemed to remember my question. "He was always very keen to please. He would bring a flower he had found, or a bug to show the stable lads. Cook would bake him miniature pies and he would disappear off on an adventure in the garden with them. Of course, he was always in sight - but he liked to think he was on his own, exploring the great unknown." Her eyes crinkled as though the memory was a happy one, and I wondered whether he had really changed that much in the intervening years. Keen for an adventure - that was certainly still true.

"And then he went off to school," she said with a sigh. "And he didn't come back here. His father wished him to spend his holidays in the service of great households - and then at sixteen, I believe, he got on a ship and made travelling the world his aim!"

She reached out and patted my arm, and the small gesture gave me more comfort than she realised. "We were so pleased when he returned with you, and now another child will know this place."

I swallowed; would Kit stay here, or would I? Would they feel the same about me if I were estranged from the heir to the estate?

"Anyway, I must get back to work. No, no, I insist - you make sure you are well rested for this supper."

I nodded and smiled, and when she had left I lay back on the blanket, feeling the sharp points of the grass even through the fabric, and closed my eyes. I could picture Kit as a small boy, running through the long grass and climbing the apple trees, taking delight in everything he found.

Tears pooled in my eyes; how I wished things had worked out the way I had hoped they would. How I wished my child could grow up here, with a mother and father who loved them more than they would ever know.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Christopher

I waited until the next morning to approach the King, knowing I would be better able to speak to Alice if I arrived well rested, and not after an arduous journey by sea and land, followed by an evening of entertaining the King.

I also wished to take Queen Katherine's advice, and sought out a young man who was skilled with a straight razor, and allowed him to lather up my face and remove the beard that had grown so wild in the months I had been away. Then he cut my hair, and as I watched the long strands fall to the floor, I felt like a weight was lifting. I would start again; I would be honest with Alice about how I felt, and I would make sure she knew that there was no other woman in my life but her.

"Danley!" King Henry cried when I was finally admitted to speak with him around noon. His closest advisers milled around, but none seemed too interested in me. "I can see your face again!"

I laughed; "I was lucky enough to find a man who was willing to make me look a little less wild, Your Grace." I decided to take advantage of his jovial mood, and set out my request immediately. "I have come to ask Your Grace if I might be allowed to return to my home. My wife is with child, and I wish to be there in time for the birth of our firstborn." I did not mention the infidelity accusations that I needed to defend myself against; a man who had a mistress he hoped to marry was not a man I needed to weigh in on my marital issues.

"Ah yes," he said, tapping his empty goblet on the table, where it was immediately refilled with wine. "I remember you saying that, before you left. She will deliver in the autumn, yes?"

"I believe so," I said, praying he would not use that as a reason to keep me here.

"You are very useful to me here, Danley, with your knowledge of the continent - and further afield."

"Thank you, Your Grace," I said, wishing in that moment I was not useful, that I had never been noticed by the King of England.

"And you are a worthy addition to our jousting and hunting parties."

My stomach dropped; he was building up to refuse, to keep me here another month or two, I knew it - and that was something I could not do.

"Please," I said, my voice cracking a little, and suddenly the interest of every man in the room was on me, the man begging to go home to his wife. "Please, I have not seen my wife in months, and I need to be with her."

For a moment he regarded me, and I wondered what he was thinking - presumably how weak I was, but I truly did not care. If it got me home to Alice, it was worth it.

Then he slammed his cup on the table, making several in the room - including me - jump. "Very well!" he said, and I breathed a heady sigh of relief. "If you promise to return once the baby is born, if I should need you to advise on another mission."

I nodded; "Of course, Your Majesty," I said, with a low bow, and once dismissed I backed out of the room with joy in my heart. The promise was unfortunate, but I would figure that out at the time - and it was likely that, without any reminders, Henry would forget about my existence anyway.

It was as I made my way to my temporary lodgings to collect my belongings, that I ran into Viscount Bellemonde.

"Lord Danley," he said, with little interest, and I bowed briefly.

"Viscount Bellemonde."

"Did you have a successful trip on behalf of the King?" he asked, and once again I had no idea how to answer.

"I believe so," I said, as he appraised me with his cold eyes.

"Well, I must not keep the King waiting. Good day."

I watched, open-mouthed, as he left - without a word about his daughter. Did he know of the babe she was carrying? I hadn't a clue -

and his distant behaviour only made me want to return to Alice quicker.



My stomach was a pit of vipers, my nerves swirling faster and faster as Chichester Place came into sight.

I had my arguments ready in my mind, although I was sure as soon as I saw her I would forget everything. One thing was certain: I needed to convince her that I had been nothing but faithful.

Dismounting in front of the house, I ran a hand through my now-shorter hair and was pleased when a stable-boy came running. The horse had earned a good rest and bale of hay; we had ridden hard and fast from London. As soon as the King had acquiesced to my request to return home, I had packed up my things without delay.

Chichester Place was as daunting as ever, but there was a sense of home that radiated from it, just from knowing Alice was within. Well, I presumed she was - I had heard nothing to say she had moved elsewhere. My heart began to race - what if she had left to join a family member, or a friend, in order to be away from me?

And then she appeared from the side garden, a posy of flowers in her hands, her hair loose down her back and her pregnant stomach large and round before her.

It had been hard to imagine a baby when she had told me her suspicions, when her stomach was flat - and yet now, with her blooming so beautifully, I could almost see her holding a baby, its giggles and cries echoing through the old building.

I knew the moment she saw me, for she stopped in her tracks and her eyes widened, and I hastened to close the gap, desperate to see her, hold her, taste her lips...

"Christopher," she said, her tone wavering a little. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. "Did- did you not receive my letter?"

"I did. Did you not receive mine?"

"I-I did not open it."

"It? I sent several."

"I only received one."

Which one, I wondered - and why did it remain unopened?

I took another step closer, but she held up her hand, her voice high and shaky as she spoke. "Please, Kit. I wish- I wish for us to live separately. We have an heir on the way..."

"Why, Alice?" I asked, desperation in my voice, not caring that we were outside where anyone might stumble upon us.

"You should be at court," she said. "The King... and the baby..."

This made no sense. "My baby is here, Alice, you are here, this is where I want to be." My voice grew louder in frustration, the clear-cut arguments melting from my mind as I had predicted they would.

"Not this baby," she said softly.

"What baby then? Of what other baby do you speak?"

"Oh, Kit!" she said, storming past me as fast as she could, throwing her hands in the air. "Don't make me say it!"

I followed, open-mouthed, easily keeping up with her. "Say what?" I put a hand on her shoulder to stop her, and she whirled round to face me, her face beautiful even in anger, her lips full and inviting.

"That you are having a baby with another woman! I know, Kit, and I can't live like that. I thought you were a different person - but now I know, and I do not wish to live together with that knowledge." Her eyes met mine. "Please, do not make me live like that."

I laughed, and her eyes narrowed, but I could not help myself; the situation was so goddamn ridiculous.

"Alice Danley," I said, when I had got myself back under control. "I am not having a baby with any woman but you. I have not looked at another woman since we were married. I have not kissed, nor lain with, any woman but you since the day we said our wedding vows."

Her face blushed at my words, and her eyes blinked furiously. "But... But Francis, he said-"

"Francis? What in God's name does Francis have to do with this?"

She looked around for a moment and then moved to the stone steps, lowering herself to sit without asking for any help. "I just - I need to sit," she said.

I nodded, wishing I had thought to suggest it, but desperate to hear what my little half-brother had to do with this nonsense.

"Francis came to stay," she said, "Not long after you left."

"I can imagine that was a delight for you," I said, irony dripping from every word. He was family, but there was no doubting he grated on the nerves of everyone he was around.

"Indeed," she said, with a roll of her eyes that made me smile. "And he spoke... he spoke of your popularity with women. 'A bed in every port', was the phrase he used, I believe."

I ran a hand through my hair and felt my cheeks reddening a little. "He knows nothing of the sort," I said. "And should not be saying it in front of a lady. And anyway, surely you cannot blame me for encounters before our marriage? Before I even knew your name?"

She shook her head; "No, no, I don't. But then he sent a letter..."

I squeezed my eyes closed for a minute, trying to control the anger welling inside me. It seemed I would need to speak with my brother sooner than I would have planned. "Oh?"

"Saying... saying your mistress at court was pregnant."

Anger rushed through me like a river; she had believed this for months. Francis had told her a straight out lie - why? To upset her? To destroy our marriage?

I pushed those thoughts away for now, knowing they could be dealt with later. For now, I needed Alice to know the truth - the truth about my fidelity, and the truth about how I felt about her.

"Alice," I said, lowering myself to kneel in front of her on the cold stone steps. I reached for her hand, and she did not move away from me this time. "I need you to listen. I have been faithful to you for the entirety of our marriage. I am having a child with you, and only you, and I hope to have many more children with you in the years to come - and we will raise them together, in our home." Tears were pooling in her eyes, but I did not stop; this was my chance to make everything clear, like I should have done from the start.

"Alice." My voice was soft, but she hung on every word. "I love you."

Chapter Seventy-Three

Alice

The words I had dreaded and desired for so long spilled from his lips, and as much as I wanted to whisper them back, I held onto them. My whole vision of him had changed once again in a heartbeat, and I needed a moment to realign my thoughts. And so, without thinking, and with tears falling from my eyes, I told him the truth.

"I don't trust love."

"I know," he said, taking my other hand in his, and my breath hitched as he brought it to his lips. "But I do love you. I have for a long time. And all I want is to be with you."

"What about travel, your life at sea, great adventures?" I asked, knowing that I feared him leaving me for that almost as much as for another woman.

"Only you. Wherever you are, is where I want to be. I never knew what love felt like, until I realised you were everything I wanted. I know you told me you would not fall in love with me - but I did fall in love with you. And I feel like its worth the risk to my heart, because you are everything to me."

I gasped, wiping a sleeve across my eyes to clear my vision, and then he leaned forward and pressed the sweetest kiss to my lips.

"I love you," he said once more, and my heart was screaming the words so loudly my lips had no choice but to comply.

"I love you too, Kit."

Chapter Seventy-Four

Christopher

I had never thought to hear the words tumble from her lips, but when they did they were so sweet, I did not even think to mention that she had promised never to say them. No, this was not the time to tease her; instead our foreheads fell together and we took a moment to enjoy simply being close enough to touch.

Eventually we stood, and hand-in-hand walked inside, with me marvelling at her pregnant form every time I caught sight of her out of the corner of my eye.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, when we sat down and called for wine, with several members of the staff stopping to welcome me home.

"Tired," she said, resting a hand across her stomach. "And massive."

I laughed; "You look as beautiful as always."

She blushed, and I revelled in the simple joy of the moment. "But all seems well?"

She nodded; "He - or she - kicks all the time. Mostly while I'm trying to sleep!" We sipped the wine with our hands still entwined, unwilling to let go of one another.

"I've missed you," I told her, wanting to be totally honest with her in this glorious moment.

"I-" she hesitated. "I missed you too." A grin spread across my lips; she grimaced slightly and readjusted her position.

"Alice?"

"Just a sharp kick," she said with a reassuring smile.

"May I?" I asked, reaching towards her. She nodded shyly, and I placed the flat of my palm where she had been rubbing. I could feel

the warmth of her skin through her thin dress, and then a sudden hard point of contact against my hand. My eyes flashed to hers in surprise, and she laughed.

"He's strong!"

"Try being on the receiving end all night," she said.

"I am so glad to be home."

"You must tell me everything," she said.

"You first! I want to know what you have been doing, what other meddling visits you have had from my family..."

She laughed, and I felt everything around me become lighter. Getting that letter had made me wonder if I would ever have this again - and yet here we were, sat together, hands entwined, laughing as if we hadn't a care in the world.

"I have heard nothing from either of them for months," she said. "Have you told them?" She gestured to her stomach, and I shook my head.

"I haven't had any contact with Father since that dinner," I said. "You didn't tell Francis?"

She shook her head. "I could hide it, then, and... well, I don't know how to say this..."

"Rest assured, my love, you can say anything you like to me. I am still utterly confused as to why he would tell lies about me to you, though."

"I did not feel right about him knowing. I don't know why... perhaps because this baby is your heir, and you will inherit instead of him? Something just told me not to say anything..."

"He has never seemed jealous... but I do not know. I shall have to speak with him, and my father. I will not have them meddling in our affairs again."

For a few moments we watched each other with smiles on our faces and laughter in our hearts.

"Does your father know?"

She nodded. "He responded with 'May God safely deliver an heir.'"

It was a cold response, there was no doubting that, and I winced a little as she screwed up her face. I did not tell her that I had seen him; surely it would only hurt more to know he had not asked about her at all.

"We have each other," I said, rubbing my thumb across the back of her hand. "And soon this little one, and hopefully many more after that. The grounds shall be overrun with little Danleys."

She giggled, and I vowed to spend the rest of my life trying to make her feel as happy and loved as she deserved; as happy and loved as she made me feel.

Chapter Seventy-Five

Alice

For the rest of the evening, it seemed our hands and lips were never far from one another's; a gentle caress while we ate, a kiss as we walked up the stairs. I had never known bliss like this; the knowledge that this man loved me, and I loved him, and that together we would love this baby so very much.

As we lay in his bed - which had become mine while he was gone, and which I hoped would now simply be 'ours' - and kissed as though time itself had been suspended, I felt desire pool in my stomach as it had done so many times in Kit's presence.

He paused, his breathing fast and his eyes wide, although he did not move away from me. "We- ah- we probably shouldn't... should we? With the baby?"

I truly did not know, although physically I felt like it would be more of a challenge.

I blushed; "I guess not. I'm sorry..."

He pressed a kiss to my forehead and pulled me close, and I wished we had removed our clothes so I could at least feel him against me.

"Don't apologise," he said, rubbing soothing circles across my skin. "I just want to keep you and the baby safe. We have our whole lives together."

I smiled; he was right. There was no rush - we were happy, and we were together, and that was all that mattered.

He helped me remove my dress, and then threw his own clothes to the floor, pulling me tight and wrapping his body around mine, despite how large I had become. With his hand resting upon my swollen stomach, I listened as his breath became deeper and slower.

"I love you," he whispered into the flesh of my shoulder, and I felt

my whole body light up at those words, said just as he slipped into sleep.

"I love you too," I whispered, not knowing if he heard me or not, but knowing I had many years to get used to saying those three vital words.

When the baby woke me with repeated kicks as it so often did, I ran a soothing hand across my stretched skin, and watched Kit sleep a while. His breathing was easy and his face serene. He had recently shaved, it seemed, and his hair was shorter than when I had last seen him, and I let my fingers roam it gently.

Remembering our earlier words, I found myself drawn to the drawer next to my bed, where the letter I had received from Kit had sat unopened for many months. Trying not to move too much, I reached over and opened the drawer with a soft squeak, and retrieved the letter - somehow without disturbing his slumber. With a deep breath, I slipped my finger beneath the seal and read the words that had been written by Kit months earlier - words, while not strictly of love, that spoke of devotion and a longing to be at home.

I held it to my heart and tried to stop the tears from falling. What a fool I had been; if I had read this then, I would have known how he felt - or at least that he wanted to be with me.

But no. I was not sure I had been ready to believe it - and Francis's cruel and confusing words would surely have made me doubt, even with this. The time for blame was surely over; now I would try to believe in the love I had always thought a sure pathway to heartbreak, and enjoy the feeling of being in Kit's arms at last.

Chapter Seventy-Six

Christopher

I sent the letter a week after I had returned, requesting - with some insistence - that my Father and Francis join us at their earliest convenience. I had no dreams of a closer relationship with my family - the family I was building with Alice was of the greatest importance now - but I refused to live with the fear that they would interfere hanging over us.

They arrived mere days later, interrupting a pleasant luncheon outside where Alice and I lay on a blanket, feeding each other tasty morsels that Mrs Batton had prepared for us and discussing baby names. Her love of the name Katherine for a girl, with 'Kitty' for short was a point of disagreement, but no harsh words were said - we were too happy in our little bubble for any negativity to burst it.

The arrival of my father and brother, however, was sure to test that.

We were dressed casually, but as they strode down the garden towards us, directed by a page, I could not bring myself to care. We stood, me helping Alice to her feet, and waited for them to come to us.

"Father," I said, with a brief bow, and Alice did her best to curtsy. "Francis."

"Christopher," Father said, a smile on his face. "And Alice! It seems like you have wonderful news."

Francis's face was as sour as though he had swallowed a lemon whole, and I began to realise that Alice's comments about his views on being the heir may not be far off the truth.

"Indeed," I said.

"Well, I am overjoyed. A Danley heir is something to be celebrated indeed! Is that why you summoned us here?"

I shook my head, all the while trying to gauge if Francis knew the

true reason for the summons. Alice's hand was tight in mine - surely a sign to him that his meddling had been unsuccessful?

"Shall we go inside?" I said, gesturing to the house. "We should sit, and perhaps have some wine, for this conversation."

Slowly we made our way in, Alice setting the pace, and as we entered through the impressive stone archway, I could tell Father noticed the improvements Alice had made in my absence.

"It looks very modern in here."

"Thank you." I chose to take it as a compliment, even though I could not be sure it was intended as such.

I sat at the head of the table, Alice directly beside me, and watched as Father and Francis decided where it would be appropriate for them to sit. Despite Father outranking me, this was my home - and I was not in the mood to appease him.

Once wine had been poured, I decided to address the situation directly; I had learned my lesson about keeping my mouth shut.

"I wish to set a few things straight," I said, glaring at Francis as though daring him to interrupt. He looked down at his wine, and I continued.

"Firstly - yes, Father, you did push me into marriage. But I married Alice of my own free will having seen her, and knowing a little of who she was, and she did the same. We love one another, and we are very excited to be starting our family."

Everyone waited for my next point, and I felt Alice's hand on my knee giving a gentle squeeze of encouragement.

"Secondly. While I have been away on the King's business, Francis came here to stay." He remained silent, unable to dispute this fact - but Father turned to him in surprise.

"Why?" he asked, and Francis looked younger than his fifteen years.

"I just came to check on Alice!" he said, his voice a whine. "Since she was alone."

"Which I would have appreciated, if you had not filled her ears

with stories of me having dalliances with other women-"

"You have done!" Francis insisted, and I felt my blood heat in anger.

"My wife does not hold me accountable for things I did before our marriage, Francis," I said, wondering if my Father's sense of propriety would balk at discussing such things in front of a lady. "But you then decided to write her a letter, telling her I had a mistress with a baby on the way." I picked up my glass and swirled the wine around, enjoying the look of shock on my Father's face. "And so I brought you here to ask you why you told such a terrible lie."

Silence reigned for a few minutes, until my father broke it.

"What possessed you," he said, rage building that I had only heard directed at me, "To tell Lady Danley that her husband was having a child with someone else?"

"I heard it..." he muttered, but I did not have to challenge that - because somehow, my father was doing that for me.

"Lies!" he said. "I hear everything that happens at court. If there were rumours of my son fathering a child, I would have known about it. You have barely set foot in the Palace. So I ask you again-" He was towering over Francis now, his voice a roar, and Alice held on to me tightly but neither of us made a move to leave. This had almost destroyed our marriage; we needed to know why.

"Why did you do it?"

"It's not fair!" he suddenly shouted, throwing his chair away from the table and pacing the room. "That he gets to inherit everything! I am your son too, I have never got on a ship and abandoned all responsibilities. So I just thought..."

His bravery seemed to run out then, as he realised the three of us were staring at him with fury in our eyes,

"You just thought?" I prompted, my voice soft yet full of fury.

"That if your marriage was not successful..."

"There would not be an heir," Alice finished, and Francis's head drooped.

"You're an idiot," Father said, sitting down and draining his wine.
"Thank god you're not my heir."

I winced; that hurt to hear, even with Francis's wrongdoing.

"You could have ruined our lives, Francis," I said, trying to make him realise the damage his letter could have caused. "And Alice was already with child - we would have been miserable, and you still would not have been the heir."

"If you ever, ever do something so stupid again, I shall leave you nothing," Father said, slamming his goblet on the table. "You are lucky to be offered a place at court, and not to be expected to go into the church like many second born sons. This was a stupid, childish action and I will not tolerate another."

Francis sniffed, and nodded, avoiding looking at any of us.

An apology did not seem to be forthcoming, but I had my answers - and I knew neither of us would ever trust Francis enough again for him to tell us lies about the other.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Alice

The leaves had turned to red and gold, and were falling from the trees with every gust of wind - and both Kit and I were waiting for a sign that this baby was ready to enter the world. Our days passed sitting in the library, where - when the doors were closed and the fire piled high with wood - we could be warm and cosy. Kit was keen to hear about the changes I had made at Chichester Place, and he pored over the updated ledgers, marvelling at where chances to economise had previously been missed.

"What did I do to deserve you?" he asked almost every day, and I would smile and wonder at the fact that such happiness existed.

The cold winds welcomed November, and other than our staff, we saw nobody. The world continued around us, but we wrapped ourselves up in one another, getting to know everything we could about the other.

And then one day, when it seemed the sun had chosen not to rise at all, the pains began. Slow at first, an ache in my back, tightening around my stomach, but it was not long before panic started to set in.

"I need the midwife," I told Kit, and his face had blanched before he went to Mrs Batton, who organised for the midwife to be fetched and for me to be helped to bed.

"It'll be okay, lass," she said, rubbing my lower back and speaking in low tones. "There'll be a baby by the end of the day, and all will be well."

Chapter Seventy-Eight

Christopher

"This is no place for a man," the midwife - an old woman with grey hair poking out from her hood and a stubborn face - told me, as I followed her up the stairs. And then the door was closed on me and I had to wait.

The waiting was agonising, and was made even worse by the wails and whimpers I could hear from our bedchamber. I paced the floors, knowing I was going through what so many fathers before me had gone through.

Had my father felt like this, on the night I was born, I wondered? The night that he had become a widower?

It did not bear thinking of. Everyone knew how dangerous childbirth was, and yet the focus up until now had been on the thought of that child she would be bringing into the world.

And yet now, as I heard the trials she had to go through, as I feared for her very life, I realised how little my life would be worth without her. She was my sun, giving me light and warmth and a very reason to live. For so long I had sought a reason, a purpose - and I had found it in my forthright wife.

The moon was my only companion that night, as I remained on the landing, alternating between pacing and sitting, knowing I could not sleep while she laboured. The women of the house were all inside with Alice, and the midwife; the men were going about their business, or sleeping.

And I waited.

Hours crawled by, and I told myself that the sound of Alice, however difficult it was to hear, was a good thing; she was all right, I could hear her shouts.

And then all went silent, and my heart raced. I stood, one foot ready to move, even though I did not know where to go. My hand rose

to perhaps knock on the door, or maybe simply shove it open, to see my wife and reassure myself that all was well.

A lusty cry filled the air, and I took several gasping breaths, needing to know that Alice was also well. When the door opened, and Mrs Batton smiled at me, relief flooded my lungs. I stepped through the open door, trying to ignore the blood that stained many sheets, and focussed on the most beautiful sight in the world: Alice, exhausted but smiling, a healthy dose of colour in her cheeks, cradling a tiny baby.

"Alice," I said, taking a step towards her, and she reached out one hand to take hold of mine.

"We have a son," she said, her smile as happy and bright as the dozens of candles around us.

"A son?" I said, my voice cracking a little, and she nodded, tears in her eyes.

I knelt beside the bed, not wishing to disturb her anymore than I had to, and pressed a kiss to her forehead, before setting my eyes on the newborn babe.

"A son," I said, wonder in my eyes at this tiny little human who was curled safely against his mother. "And you are both well?" I asked, first to Alice, and then turning to the midwife, who looked a little less stern now.

"They are both strong, and well," she said. "Congratulations, my lord."

"Thank you, thank you," I said, reaching my hand to touch his little fingers. And to Alice, I had to repeat it again. "Thank you, Alice. You are incredible."

She smiled; "I hope you never forget that," she said, and a ripple of laughter went through the room.

"I love you," I whispered to her, rising and pressing another kiss to her hair. And then to my son, the heir to everything I would one day have, the physical manifestation of the heart-shatteringly strong love I felt for his mother, I whispered; "Welcome to the world, little one. We love you."

Chapter Seventy-Nine

Alice

Epilogue

Excitement about the upcoming festive season filled the house, and despite the fact that we would be fasting for several days yet, we had begun to bring in greenery from outside to decorate with. Since Mother's death, my father had shown little interest in decorating for the Christmas season, and although the Court was always decked out impressively, I had no hand in those decorations.

This year would be different.

We had invited our Fathers to join us, but both had politely declined, saying they had other plans - and neither of us were too sorry about that. While Kit rocked baby Thomas in his arms - and the nanny insisted she should try to get him to sleep - I had disappeared from the house and gathered armfuls of holly and ivy, and was now wrapping it, with a little help, around every part of the house I could.

I was humming old carols, that I had forgotten the words to, when Kit entered the room.

"My two favourite men," I said with a grin, skipping over to plant a kiss on baby Tommy's head, and then on Kit's waiting lips. It had been mere days since I had been churched, and I revelled in being allowed out of the house again.

"You seem happy," Kit said, a smile on his lips.

"There's a lot to be happy about," I said. No longer did I look for reasons my joy might be taken from me; instead I enjoyed every minute of it.

"I have news," Kit said, watching as I attempted to make holly leaves stay on the mantlepiece.

"Oh?"

"A messenger came from court. He brought congratulations from the King, and a very generous gift..."

I paused, and raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to elaborate.

"A horse," he said. "A very large, magnificent-looking black horse!"

I laughed; "Well, it is certainly generous. I feel it may be a good many years before Tommy is riding a horse - but it was kind of him to think of us."

Kit nodded. "There was some gossip, too..."

I clicked my tongue; "I thought we had learned the hard way not to listen to gossip?"

"I fear this may be true."

I paused, and took Tommy from him, taking the moment's rest to cuddle my darling baby. I had not known the joy motherhood would bring, and I wanted to soak in every second I could.

"Go on then."

"There are rumours that the King has married Anne Boleyn in secret. That he has declared his marriage to Queen Katherine nullified."

I gasped, shaking my head; surely it could not be true? But then, I would put nothing past this King - not in his desperation for a male heir.

"I hope it is not true," I said, and Kit nodded in agreement.

A knock at the door interrupted us, and I allowed the hovering nanny to take Tommy for a while, as guests were announced. We were not expecting the local families over until Christmas Eve, where we planned to host a feast for everyone - but it seemed many of the local wives were here to see me.

Wiping off the sticky residue from the leaves onto my apron, I removed it and handed it to Kit.

"Will I do?" I asked, and he laughed, and pressed a kiss to my lips.

"Always."

In the great hall, I was surprised to see almost every local yeoman farmer's wife awaiting me.

"Good morning," I said, a smile on my face, and they all curtsied.

"It is wonderful to see you out and about again," one said, and I thanked her graciously.

"We have good news, my lady," the youngest of the group said. "We have found a suitable location for the school - an old barn that is no longer required. With the money you have secured, we believe it can be properly equipped."

"Excellent!" I said, pleased that despite my absence, things had been coming together. When I had written to them of the savings we had managed to make that would provide the starting money for the school, I had not know whether they would make any progress without me. "And any progress on finding a teacher?"

"We think so!" said Anne Hewitt, who had sent us a beautiful parcel of knitting for the baby. "There was one candidate last month, but he was not willing to teach girls..."

"Well, he is not the right man for the job then."

"Exactly," Anne said with a nod. "But there is a young man who has recently completed his university education, and has fallen in love and married a local girl. He sounded very interested!"

Happiness filled my heart at the thought that the local boys and girls might have a decent school to attend. "I must meet him!" I said. "Well done, ladies - and thank you."

"We're sorry to disturb you, when we're coming for Christmas Eve," another said, and I shook my head.

"Not at all. This news has made me truly happy."

Once they had left, with excited chatter about our plans, I ran to find Kit, to tell him of another plan that was coming to fruition. When he did not answer my calls, I headed to the library - which was so often our place of sanctuary - and found him lying on a padded bench, a book in his hand.

"Everything all right?" he asked as I bounded in, and I nodded,

relaying the information to him with all the excitement of a giddy schoolgirl myself.

"You," he said, standing and taking a step towards me, "Are the best thing that has ever happened to this place."

I smiled, and stood on tiptoes to place a chaste kiss to his lips - but quickly, his hand moved behind my head, and the kiss became one that made my heart flutter and blood pound in my ears.

"You are so clever," he said, his tongue licking gently at the shell of my ear. "And so dedicated," his voice continued, but his teeth were nibbling the delicate flesh of my lobe, and I gasped at every movement, forgetting the words that were falling from his lips or the reason I was in this room. "And I am so proud you are my wife."

I shrieked as he whisked me into his arms and strode towards the door, finally getting my thoughts to calm down a little. "Kit! What are you doing?"

"Showing you how much I love you," he said, and what could I say to that? Absolutely nothing - and so I let him carry me to our bedroom without a word of complaint, and as the door closed behind us, I asked myself the question that arose so frequently: what had I done to deserve such happiness?



Read the next story in the series at: mybook.to/tudorhearts3

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading 'Can't Let My Heart Fall', the second in The Hearts of Tudor England series. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it! I fell in love with the Tudor period a long time ago, and although I don't think I would want to live in that time, it would be amazing to go back for a day!

I am not a historian, and so please forgive any anachronisms. Henry VIII did marry Anne Boleyn secretly on 14th November, 1532 - as the gossip at court suggested - and officially on 25th January 1533. All interactions with the King and Queen are fictitious; but they provide a dramatic backdrop for the love story of Alice and Kit. This is a tale of love and family in the dazzling Tudor Court, and is one of six books in the series. You can order them all today if you love your romance with a Tudor backdrop!

Want more?

Can't get enough of Tudor romance? Get a free short story set in 'The Hearts of Tudor England world' here: <https://tinyurl.com/restoremyheart>

Read on for a sneak peak at book 3 in 'The Hearts of Tudor England' series: Misrule My Heart.

Misrule My Heart

Book Three in 'The Hearts of Tudor England' Series

The flowers on the spinning wheel were fairly ceremonial; it had been a long time since I had seen mother sit and spin anything at it. But traditions were traditions, and since work was forbidden betwixt Christmas Eve and Epiphany, it looked well to have anything that could be construed as a work tool taken out of action - no matter that we were a family of money now, and had very little need of manual work.

I ran my hand across the blooms and smiled; tonight there would be yet another fish supper, and midnight mass, and then the festivities would truly begin. I had always loved the festive season, but since Father had begun to make his way in the world, everything had grown more sumptuous. The gowns, the decorations, the feasts planned for the revels... all so much more than I had grown up with.

There was even talk that by next year we might be invited to court to celebrate the season, with King Henry, Queen Katherine and all the other fine lords and ladies of the land. Wouldn't that be a sight!

This year, however, we were at home, and for that I was quite grateful. At eighteen, I was the last of the women I knew to not be betrothed - but then, before my father's business flourished so spectacularly, there had been no pressing need for me to be married. There had been boys I liked the look of, certainly - but no-one I'd had thoughts of marrying.

I had thought I would have some say in the matter, but things were different now. Yes the clothes were finer, the food was richer, the house was larger and warmer - but my options had also been limited.

As I walked through the Great Hall, which was busy with servants sweeping out the magnificent fireplace, ready for the yule log which would be selected later in the day - I tried to turn my thoughts around. No, many doors had been opened to me by Father's success at supplying the palace with silk, and losing any freedom I had to choose

whom I might marry was a price well worth paying.

So I was pleased to be spending this Christmas with my family and the many guests we were opening our doors to - because if things went according to plan, I would be married by next year.

Married. It sent a thrill down my spine whenever I thought of it, although I wasn't too sure whether that was from excitement or fear. Or a healthy mix of the two.

I had not yet met the man whom my father was hoping to link me to; but I knew he was very much aiming to have us betrothed before Twelfth Night. A formal wedding could follow later; once we were betrothed, there would be no putting us asunder, and the man in question was to be one of the guests at the frivolities of the season.

I knew only three things of him: that he was a northern lord, with a large estate somewhere near Manchester; that he was twenty-five years my senior; and that he had three sons with his first wife, who had passed away the previous year.

"Sorry miss," a young serving girl ducked out of my way, looking downward and scurrying towards the stairs. We had never been properly poor, but the most we'd had was a cook and a maid, and so the increase in the number of staff was something I was having to get used to. I wasn't very good at staying out of the way when I was meant to - like now, when they were trying to prepare the room for the yuletide celebrations.

Standing by a small window in the stone facade, I looked out to the stables. Riding was simpler when we were so much less important too - and, I supposed, because I was younger. Although I still wore my hair loose down my back, I was old enough now to know riding astride a horse, or unaccompanied, was unacceptable - as much as I had got away with it in the past.

"Isabel!" my mother called from the end of the corridor.

"Yes Mother?"

"Our guests will be here in less than two hours! You must make sure you are ready. You know how important it is to make the best first impression on Lord Lisle."

I ducked my head; "Yes mother." I knew a dress of red brocade was laid out on the bed for me, and that my simple day dress would

not be acceptable to greet the important guests. Most were not lords and ladies, for they were at court or hosting their own festivities - but the man my father hoped to make my husband was most definitely high born.

Mother touched her hand to the side of my cheek, and smiled. "You are a pretty girl," she said. "But you know we must dazzle him so the issue of your birth disappears. Imagine being addressed as 'my lady' - what an honour you would bestow on this family."

I smiled up at my mother, whose hair still retained its blonde glow despite some grey beginning to appear. My mother, I knew, had married for love, despite neither of them having much money to bring to such a marriage - but she wished for so much more for me, and I was well aware of the duty I had to fulfill to help my family reach the higher echelons of society. With no brothers, just a sister, everything fell to me - and I would not disappoint my family.

"I'll go and get dressed," I told her, waiting until I was out of sight to take the steps two at a time. Perhaps, I thought, Lord Lisle would have a wonderful personality, and the age difference would not be too apparent; after all, I liked to think of myself as mature, even if I was young in years.

And to be a lady... that certainly was an exciting, scary prospect.

Books In This Series

The Hearts of Tudor England

Six enchanting stories of love, loss and laughter, set during the Tudor Era.

The Love of a Lord

When grieving hearts find each other, can love overcome secrets, vows and society's expectations?

Compelled to uncover the secret surrounding her mother's death, Annelise Edwards unexpectedly finds herself the guest of the handsome Lord Gifford.

Lord Nicholas Gifford has no interest in women after being jilted by his betrothed, but he cannot ignore his sense of duty when a mysterious woman appears on his doorstep during a terrible storm and falls ill.

As they wait for the storm and Annelise's fever to pass, they are forced to share the grief that is weighing on both their hearts. And when Nicholas becomes more involved in Annelise's efforts to piece together her mother's past, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny their blooming attraction.

Will Nicholas give up the lonely life he has become accustomed to? And will it even matter once he finds out Annelise's mother was nothing but their maid?

If you like your rags to riches romance mixed with Tudor drama, you'll love this heart-warming first novel in the touching The Hearts of Tudor England series.

The Love of a Lord is book one in The Hearts of Tudor England series, and can be read as a standalone novel.

Can't Let My Heart Fall

When a marriage is arranged for Alice and Christopher, love was never part of the bargain.

Alice Page long ago swore she would never fall in love. After watching her father's heartbreak at the death of her mother, and Queen Katherine's pain at her husband's philandering, it just doesn't seem worth the pain.

Marriage to Christopher Danley, however, makes keeping that solemn vow to herself somewhat difficult. In the daytime she can keep her distance, but at night she realises she has never felt closer to another human before.

Lord Christopher 'Kit' Danley knows he will be an Earl one day, but he plans to spend every moment of the time before that happens travelling the seas and discovering new lands. When his father delivers an ultimatum, marriage is the only option – but never did he imagine he would find marriage as enjoyable as he does with Lady Alice.

With Alice panicking at realising her heart may be lost to the handsome Kit Danley, and Kit called away on the King's business, can love flourish in this marriage of convenience?

Can't Let My Heart Fall is book two in The Hearts of Tudor England series, and can be read as a standalone novel.

Misrule My Heart

Isabel Radcliffe knows she must marry well. As the daughter of a merchant who has risen at Court, many opportunities are within her grasp - and marrying a Lord is one of them.

When her father hosts nobility over the 12 days of Christmas, she knows she will meet the man he wishes her to marry.

What she does not expect is for him to be so old or unpleasant...

Or to fall in love with a visiting stable lad.

Misrule My Heart is book three in 'The Hearts of Tudor England' series, and can be read as a standalone novel.

Saving Grace's Heart

Since witnessing her sister's romantic elopement, Grace Radcliffe has

been determined to choose her own husband.

And while finding excuses not to marry every man her father has put in her path has worked so far, she knows time is not on her side - and so she sets her sights on the handsome Duke of Lincoln, planning to ensure they are a good match before letting her father seal the deal.

When Harry, the dashing new Duke of Leicester, is put in her path instead, she knows there must be something wrong with him - for her father has never picked well in the past.

But when he helps her in her hour of greatest need, she begins to question that judgement.

Can Grace find the route to true love? Or will her free-spirited ways lead her into a loveless marriage?

Saving Grace's Heart is Book Three in 'The Hearts of Tudor England' Series, and can be read as a standalone novel.

Learning to Love Once More

A widowed Earl, a lonely governess, and a whole lot of heartbreak.

James Trant, Earl of Essex, has never known an all-consuming love - but after losing his wife to the perils of childbirth, he resolved not to suffer that pain again.

Fed up of being a burden on her Aunt and Uncle, orphaned Catherine Watt decides being a governess will fill the loneliness in her soul and provide her with a modicum of independence. What she is not expecting is to fall in love with the Earl she is working for.

When James realises he and the children need Catherine in order to flourish, he offers marriage - but in name only. There will be no more children, he is resolute about that.

As Catherine falls deeper and deeper in love with the damaged Earl, can she persuade him that love is worth risking your heart for?

Learning to Love Once More is Book Five in 'The Hearts of Tudor England' series, and can be read as a standalone novel.

An Innocent Heart

On the same day as Henry VIII's second daughter is born, Elizabeth Beaufort makes her way into the world. Inspired by the way the Princess lives her life, she vows to live as a maid - no love, no marriage, no children.

But as the Tudor dynasty sends lives in England reeling, can Bessie Beaufort's heart remain caged?

Edward Ferrers has always known he will marry and carry on his father's merchant business. In fact, such a marriage has been lined up for him for several years - until a chance meeting at the Tudor Court sends his heart racing for Bessie Beaufort.

In a time of courtly love, female purity and religious upset, can Edward persuade Bessie that their love is worth fighting for?

An Innocent Heart is Book Six in 'The Hearts of Tudor England' series, and can be read as a standalone novel.

Books By This Author

The Worst Christmas Ever?

Can the magic of the Christmas season be rediscovered in a small Devon town?

When Shirley 'Lee' Jones returns home from an awful day at the office, the last thing she expects to find is her husband in bed with another woman. Six weeks until Christmas, and Lee finds the life she had so carefully planned has been utterly decimated.

Hurt, angry and confused, Lee makes a whirlwind decision to drive her problems away and ends up in Totnes, an eccentric town in the heart of Devon. As Christmas approaches, Lee tries to figure out what path her life will follow now, as she looks at it from the perspective of a soon-to-be 31-year-old divorcée.

Can she ever return to her normal life? Or is a new reality - and a new man - on the horizon?

Finding herself and flirting with the handsome local police officer might just make this the best Christmas ever.

Lawyers and Lattes

A new home, a new man, and a new career are all great - but do they always lead to happily-ever-after?

Shirley 'Lee' Jones has made some spontaneous and sometimes questionable decisions since the breakup of her marriage, but deciding to remain in the quirky town of Totnes has got to be the biggest decision so far. Now Lee has a new business, gorgeous man, and friends keeping life interesting. But when questions of law crop up in her life again, she finds herself yearning for the career and the life plan she gave up when she left everything behind.

And when unexpected news tests her relationship, her resolve, and everything tying her to her life, Lee must decide between the person she is and the person she wants to become.

Sometimes decisions about life, law, and love all reside in grey areas. Will Lee's newfound happiness in Devon be short-lived? Or could her new life give her the chance to have everything she's ever wanted?

Feeling the Fireworks

Can Beth rekindle her passion for life and love in picturesque Dartmouth?

When Beth Davis made a whirlwind decision to move to picturesque Dartmouth to shake up her repetitive life, the last thing she expected to find was a passion in life - or a man who could make her feel fireworks.

A change in home and job seems like exactly what Beth needs to blow away the cobwebs that have been forming around her dead-end job. With little money to her name and no real plan, Beth needs to make things work, fast - without relying on her big sister Lee to bail her out.

When she meets the handsome, mysterious Caspian in a daring late-night swim, she instantly feels fireworks that she had long forgotten. Can Dartmouth - and Caspian - reawaken her passion for life and love?

'Feeling the Fireworks' is Book 3 in the South West Series but can be read as a standalone novel. Fall in love with Devon today!

The Best Christmas Ever

A Devon wedding with the magic of Christmas and a dose of small town charm - and the potential for a lot of family drama.

Lee Davis is about to marry the man of her dreams - and at her favourite time of year. But she's finding it hard to feel the magic of Christmas or the excitement about her wedding as a face from her past reappears and worries about her second time down the aisle surface.

James Knight thought he had everything - the woman he was destined to be with, an adorable daughter and a happy life in the countryside. But with his wife-to-be seeming more and more distant, is he doomed to be jilted at the alter again?

Beth Davis is pretty sure she's lost her heart to handsome, brooding Caspian - but he's moved away to Edinburgh, and their fiery romance seems to have been stopped before it had truly started.

Caspian Blackwell wants to be excited about his promotion and moving to an vibrant new city - but his heart is very much back in Dartmouth.

Can a festive Devon wedding make this the Best Christmas Ever?

Trouble in Tartan

Beth Davis didn't plan on falling in love when she moved to Dartmouth - she just wanted to feel some fireworks. The problem is, she's pretty sure that is exactly what is happening - but the object of her affections is living 600 miles away in Edinburgh. As she tries to start a career as an author, downs a few too many glasses of wine and attempts to make ends meet, keeping a long-distance relationship alive proves more and more challenging.

Caspian Blackwell has never let his heart make big decisions - but he's sorely tempted when the distance between them begins to cause problems in his relationship with Beth. When he decides he wants all or nothing, can he really put this new relationship before his career? Or will he end up exactly where he always feared he would: heartbroken?

A tale of love, longing and a relationship stretched between coastal England and Scotland.

Summer of Sunshine

A summer holiday can wash up a whole host of family dramas...

Lee Knight wants to relax on a summer holiday away with her husband, sister and brother-in-law. But her desire for another baby is not making it easy to unwind.

James Knight hates to see his wife upset, and hopes a trip away will make her troubles lessen. But with concerns about his father's health, he's finding it hard to be there for her as much as she really needs.

Beth Blackwell is sick to death of everyone asking her two questions: when is her next book coming out, and when is she going to have a baby. The first is proving more difficult than she expected, and the second - well, she's not sure whether that's the way she wants her life to go.

Caspian Blackwell is enjoying life as a newlywed in Edinburgh - although in his heart, he's missing living in Devon. A spate of redundancies at work has him pondering his future - but he worries his new wife's heart is engaged elsewhere when she becomes increasingly distant.

Can sun, sea and sand send the two couples back into more harmonious waters?